wouldn't it be sad if i hadn't met you at all?

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wouldn't it be sad if i hadn't met you at all?

by lohoron

Summary

So Ben was not coming to Christmas. Was not gonna be around for New Years. Whatever.

It's December 20th. Sort of. The 21st, if we're being technical. Matt moved out of his dorm last night with Kyle's resistant assistance, and he's lying in bed, staring up at his ever so familiar popcorn ceiling, thinking.

He's got a real gripe with that. Thinking. It should not be so easy to keep the shit inside alive. Spiraling should be more effortful, not a mode to slip into all unaware and clumsy. One thought jumps to another, rocks in a lake, contact tepid at best. Matt spirals like second nature. First nature. It happens without permission; the car swerves right when his hands drop contact with the wheel.

There are decisions to be made. Winter Break is the time for decisions.

Notes

title from "'till forever" by labi siffre

Chapter 1: 1. Rumination

Chapter Summary

> “Listen, I’ll call you, yeah? On Christmas. We can— I’ll go see Chris and Casey.”
>
> “Yeah,” Ben responded, tone shifted to a simmering kind of guilt. “I sent you a gift. Should get there on time.”
>
> Matt smiled at that, felt like he might cry for a different reason, and rummaged around his desk for his Camels. “I’ll send yours out, too,” he assured despite not having one yet, squished pack in hand, tapping a cigarette out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Matt is absolutely exhausted and perpetually annoyed and needs a break more than he could possibly express in coherent words.

But not this type of break. Not Winter Break. Because this bloated excuse for a pause is filled solely with family gatherings and reading lists and moving out of his dorm unwillingly. Winter Break is, by his very professional measure, a total fucking scam.

Even more so after he got news from Ben.

(“I’m not makin’ it down this year, man,” Ben’s voice rang reasonably quiet and unrelentingly loud at once. “I— uh… just don’t have the money. Honestly, like, you should see the situation I’ve got set up here.” He laughed like he needed to ease the tension, emphasize some form of irony — move to one of the richest cities in the entire country and become a borderline squatter in your own apartment.

Matt bit the loose skin of his bottom lip between his teeth, tried his best not to voice disappointment. “You can dip into the account, y’know? I mean— There’s still money in there from—”

“No, yeah, I know. I know. I just—” Ben paused, sighed. [Matt found himself hoping, silently, too silent for even his own brain to hear, that Ben wasn’t tired of him already, hadn’t found cooler people up in L.A.] “I’m enrolling in the Spring, y’know, and I just… I wanna get some roots in. More solid ones.”

He didn't know. Matt did not understand that, not really. It wasn't fair.

But he squeezed his thigh and let a tired breath loom through the telephone line as some sign of disdain, of honesty, before saying: "Yeah, yeah. I get it, man." And maybe it was the lack of sleep or the constant caffeine overdosing or the one-and-a-half packs a day he was pounding down, but Matt thought he might cry for a second. "Listen, I'll call you, yeah? On Christmas. We can— I'll go see Chris and Casey."

"Yeah," Ben responded, tone shifted to a simmering kind of guilt. "I sent you a gift. Should get there on time."

Matt smiled at that, felt like he might cry for a different reason, and rummaged around his desk for his Camels. "I'll send yours out, too," he assured despite not having one yet, squished pack in hand, tapping a cigarette out. "Look, I gotta finish this stupid fuckin' paper. But I'll— We'll talk soon. Yeah?"

"Yeah. Yes, definitely," Ben confirmed, voice thin like he was trying to find his breath. "Good luck. Call me if you need a soundboard."

Matt smiled again, always found it so easy to smile at Ben's desire to be helpful, and nodded to himself, lighting the end of his cigarette. "Will do."

"And lay off the goddamn cigarettes. You sound worse than me," he added with a chuckle, followed directly by an exhale Matt knew was the product of a previous tobacco-filled inhale.

"No promises.")

So Ben was not coming to Christmas. Was not gonna be around for New Years. Whatever.

It's December 20th. Sort of. The 21st, if we're being technical. Matt moved out of his dorm last night with Kyle's resistant assistance, and he's lying in bed, staring up at his ever so familiar popcorn ceiling, thinking.

He's got a real gripe with that. Thinking. It should not be so easy to keep the shit inside alive. Spiraling should be more effortful, not a mode to slip into all unaware and clumsy. One thought jumps to another, rocks in a lake, contact tepid at best. Matt spirals like second nature. First nature. It happens without permission; the car swerves

right when his hands drop contact with the wheel.

There are decisions to be made. Winter Break is the time for decisions. Michelle, his girlfriend who he struggles to call his girlfriend, is waiting for an invitation to meet his mother, he knows she is. Everybody is all cozy and together and bathing in Christmas spirit, supposedly, so this should be the perfect time. She'd walk in on the 23rd, not the 24th, the 24th is reserved for his grandparents and his aunt Judy and, if he were fucking here, making cookies with Ben. But she could come on the 23rd and make a real splash. She's funny, she's pretty, she's likable. He knows his mother would bombard her with questions and be subtly impressed once she mentioned studying Immunology, her desire to be a doctor, to cure lupus after watching her father struggle with it for decades. She'd be enjoyed. He knows this.

But the fact is that he's not sure *he* would enjoy it. Her. In his space, in his room, in his kitchen, talking to his brother and his mother. Michelle is great. Michelle is funny and smart and beautiful and good at communicating and Matt, somehow, is not in love with her.

And, fuck, he really wishes Ben were here. They'd talk this through, would skip dinner so the beer hit harder, blab about missing each other like they'd been somehow bound together cosmically and ripped apart by evil. Ben would probably tell him to invite her, to keep her happy. Love can always grow. Love doesn't need to show up with flashing lights. Sometimes the bulbs blink on one by one and the sign remains dull enough until they're all lit. It's possible. Michelle's sign could still be lighting up.

The night is perfect dwelling time. Perfect for murderous fantasies of falling in love and staying there. It's all just an accident, like tripping into the Garden of Eden, an accident we wait our whole fucking lives for, base ourselves around, stick ourselves to.

Matt lets out a sigh, deep and torturous, his palms rubbed into his sunken sockets. His alarm clock flashes 2:23 A.M. He's mad at Ben and he's pretty sure it's too late to invite Michelle even if he wanted her here. He really does not want her here. The spring will bring an explanation he can't conjure up right now, will answer the phone for him later and let her know he's sorry and she's great but he's too tired to try and fall into anything.

His mind is heavy, perhaps physically, as he closes his eyes and concedes to attempting to give in to a genuine need for sleep. He can

be mad at Ben in the morning. He can wonder about breaking up with Michelle when the sun is up.

Chapter End Notes

> the aim is to finish this before actual christmas. stay tuned to see if lohoron can make it happen (between two jobs and grad school).

Chapter 2: 2. The Mall

Chapter Summary

> “You asked me to take you to the mall. I’m taking you to the damn mall,” Kyle announces, has no interest in Matt’s suffering, taking a seat next to Matt on his bed like some needy overlord. “Get up.”
>
> Matt groans loud and guttural, dragged out of him.

“Get up.”

Matt is verbally and physically assaulted before even flickering his lids open, punched on the shoulder, grabbed and shaken from side to side.

He tugs at his blanket and shoves it over his head, covering his face, any proof of life, and produces no sound. Maybe Kyle will simply walk away if he ignores that he exists. That’s plausible. Totally.

Alas, his blanket gets tugged down. “It’s almost noon, asshole.”

“It’s fuckin’ winter break, asshole,” Matt responds croakily, tugging the blanket back and covering himself up to his eyebrows. This is unacceptable; a man’s sleeping time during any college break must not be interrupted. He’s pretty sure that’s a commandment.

“You asked me to take you to the mall. I’m taking you to the damn mall,” Kyle announces, has no interest in Matt’s suffering, taking a seat next to Matt on his bed like some needy overlord. “Get up.”

Matt groans loud and guttural, dragged out of him.

(“I gotta get Michelle a gift,” he breathed tiredly, hauling a box of textbooks up the stairs with popped arm veins.

Reading is good until your accumulation of academic texts begins to rival with the amount you lift at the gym. Matt felt the goddamn burn.

“Ben, too,” he reminded himself out loud, looking down to see if Kyle was catching his not-so-subtle request.

“Yeah, fine,” Kyle sighed back, not-so-secretly grinning. “You gotta get a car one of these days.”

“Once you’re dead, I’ll consider it,” Matt snorted back, let the box land in his doorway with a heavy thud.

Kyle lugged up a box full of clothing and dumped it beside Matt’s books. “Lucky me,” he panted, wiping his shirt free from any dust stubbornly sticking to him.)

“Lori’s coming for Christmas,” he says, then, like a kind of last-ditch effort. “Mom said to pick up more decorations.”

That may be a lie. Matt can’t actually tell. Last year was quite the Ornament Massacre; three over-active dogs, four dozen antique Christmas ornaments in a last-minute, partially nude tree, and cookies burning in the oven do not mix well. So. It’s not totally impossible their mom is making them get new decorations to compensate. Especially with a new guest.

But that’s not really his problem. Kyle has a beautiful girlfriend who he loves and is coming to Christmas and needs to be impressed, as if Christmas trees can really impress anybody anymore, and somehow this is also Matt’s problem.

It’s easy to ignore yesterday’s desire to find gifts for Michelle and Ben. His bed is too comfortable. Kyle is too annoying.

Kyle, think of the Devil, tugs at his sheets again, sends them flying, leaves Matt cold and vulnerable to the elements in his t-shirt and boxer shorts.

“You’re a fuckin’ dick,” Matt shivers, close to giving up, his pillow folded around his head, pushed in at the ears.

“I’m giving you five minutes or I’ll leave without you.” Kyle says it like a threat, like it doesn’t sound like a dream to be left alone, and gets up to stand in the doorway. “I’m not taking you tomorrow.”

Matt groans, awfully reminded of the reality that is needing to send his gift to Ben and exchange with Michelle on the 26th, at best, if she doesn’t insist on some sort of late-night smuggling event on Christmas Eve. He should be prepared to smuggle. “Gimme twenty,” he offers.

“Ten,” Kyle counters.

“Fuck you. Fifteen.”

“Deal.”

And he's finally alone again, shivering as the ceiling fan blows shaky, uneven air through his already freezing room.

Reluctantly, Matt hoists himself up on his elbows and looks around the covered floor with squinted eyes, trying to find the socks he kicked off last night. He rubs the sleep out of his eyes, makes sure to give extra attention to those unsightly crusty bits in the corners, and sits up fully with a dramatic sigh he hopes Kyle can hear from all the way wherever the fuck he is.

It's with great displeasure that he finds himself getting dressed and realizing Kyle is actually right; if he doesn't do this now, he won't, and he's still gonna send Ben's gift out, and find some kinda necklace that won't stain Michelle's skin like the one he gave her for her birthday did. He's got everybody else in order.

Picking gifts for family is easy. It's almost routine; mom likes getting a year's supply of coffee or local theater memberships, Kyle likes a good pair of pajamas and a second-hand so-ugly-it's-endearing mug, recently he's been enjoying sculpting even more than usual, so Matt figured he should add that into the rotation. His grandparents are even easier; they're happy with a puzzle and some books about obscure history.

But Ben has always been impossible to give gifts to. Matt thinks about it too much — it needs to mean something. It always has.

("The fuck is this?" Ben asked, a haphazardly wrapped present with a note on the top shoved into his hands, staring at Matt in disbelief. "I already opened your present."

Matt shrugged, kept it all so casual to counteract the weight he funneled into the gift. It was Ben's eighteenth; he was heading off to Vermont in a short week for college and Matt was decently sure he'd never get to have him this way again. So available. "I got you somethin' else. For, uh… Just wanted to give it in private."

Ben's eyebrows twitched down in curiosity, staring back at Matt again, unsure of how to proceed, eyes brimming with something happy and overflowing. He sat down on the basement couch, coughed into his elbow and wiped the summer sweat off his forehead.

He undid the masking tape carefully, as if the wrapping were the present, or just as important as it, anyway, folding it aside.

The note remained dangling against the unwrapped paper and Matt

was afraid Ben had missed it, hadn't bothered to look, and his chest filled with lead, made his feet sink deep deep deep into the floor. He squeezed his eyes shut for a second and let a bead of sweat trickle down his forehead, suddenly beyond nerves, climbing the other side of the fence back to dangerously calm.

Fucking finally, Ben lifted the gift up. Blinked a few times.

"Is this—?" Ben asked, slowly, didn't need to finish the question as he held the picture frame up. "Where'd you even find this?"

Matt chuckled, couldn't gauge his response, couldn't find out if he was creeped the fuck out or impressed or delighted. He sat down next to Ben and wiped his nervous hands on the couch cushion. "I mean, I saved it," he said, picked at the corner of his thumb.

"No shit," Ben smiled, finally fucking showed Matt something to hold onto, and shuffled closer to him so they could both look.

A jointly annotated page of *You Can't Take It With You,* the first play they worked on together for school production as friends once Matt got over his *look at this cocky kid marching into high school theater like he knows the ropes* phase.

It'd been during the first off-book rehearsal; Matt had gotten cast as Paul, and Ben was Ed's understudy. To be helpful, Ben decided to mark a previously blank copy of the script with notes, compliments, joys, scattered thoughts, criticisms, while he observed the entire play. He kept stern focus on Matt's part. Matt returned the favor on the same copy during an understudy rehearsal after Ben had shyly presented it to him.

The page Matt decided to frame was one where they were marking each other, together, Matt's red pen overlapping Ben's pencil strokes. Mostly positive, sometimes non-descript [*nice* or *good delivery*], sometimes obnoxiously detailed [*I think it might be better if you play this less for laughs. Would probably be even funnier. We can practice it that way if you want*], sometimes plainly critical [*missed this line* or *stop yelling*]. Ben drew a little stick figure on a skateboard in the corner of the page, smudged by his own fingerprint. Matt doodled a dark scribble to keep his focus.

They looked at it together in near silence, pointed at scribbles with quiet snide comments about each other's handwriting, got closer and closer until Matt's ear received the warmth of the side of Ben's head.

“This is… It’s really—”

“I know it’s a lot, I just—”

“No, God, shut up,” Ben laughed, flicked Matt’s thigh. “Was gonna say it’s really cool. Special. And, uh, yeah. Thank you. Thanks. It’s— Man, I can’t believe you kept this.”

Matt smiled down at his fidgety hands and nodded. “You drew a lotta dicks in there. May be worth something someday,” he tried, heart half in it, almost saddened to be breaking the solidness of the moment.

Ben elbowed his ribs and placed the frame down on the table in front of them. “You’re probably right,” he grinned, cocksure and young in a way that was still acceptable. He wrapped an arm around the back of the couch, rubbed Matt’s shoulder all non-committal and silent like they both knew what it really meant. *I’m not leaving. Not really.*

Ben read the note by himself moments later. Didn’t comment on how overly sentimental it was. Smiled and tucked it into his pocket.)

Matt is reluctantly shaking his body down the stairs with heavy steps approximately twelve minutes later, faced with Kyle’s slightly empathetic but mostly self-satisfied glance.

He’s holding out a packet of Pop-Tarts, the strawberry kind, the only kind Matt can stomach un-toasted, and pats his back as he rounds the curve of the stairs. “Eat in the car. Mall’s gonna be packed already.”

Ungraciously, Matt rips the Pop-Tarts out of Kyle’s hand and tears the corner with his teeth as he pads over to his sneakers by the door. He reluctantly throws on his winter coat and drapes a gray scarf over his shoulders. “Remind me to never let you remind me of anything ever again,” he mumbles, barely audible, biting a chunk of his breakfast as he pulls on the handle.

“That’s gonna be tricky,” Kyle chuckles, following right after him, locking the door behind them quietly as Matt slides into the passenger side of his unlocked already-running car, heating up to try and fight the New England frost.

Twisted priorities.

Matt props his feet on the dashboard and properly rips the foil away from his breakfast, takes an obnoxious bite in hopes of getting crumbs everywhere. Really, he’s not so sure why he’s so beyond pissed. Fine,

he didn't sleep well. And, sure, he's lacking his usual morning coffee. And maybe, maybe, he's still thinking about Ben and his idiotic excuse and how he's gonna have to find a new best friend pretty soon. Michelle is in there, too, somewhere. Mainly in the gift sector, at the moment.

Beside him, Kyle turns the key fully and drops in one of his shitty sad-boy CDs. Nothing like getting excited about the Hell that is a pre-Christmas mall with three consecutive The Smiths songs. Absolutely stellar.

"You know what you're getting Michelle?" Kyle asks, sparing a short glance to Matt's posture.

Matt shrugs. "Not really. A necklace or something, I think. Maybe matching earrings."

He understands this is lazy. It's why he's not particularly excited to share it.

"I'll help," Kyle assures him. "As long as you get her something that doesn't look like you found it on the floor, you should be fine."

Matt chuckles, draws one leg up on the chair and tucks his knee close.

"And Ben?" He asks, almost carefully, as if talking about Ben ever needs to be careful.

"No fuckin' idea, dude," Matt groans, feels the weight of the looming gift that definitely won't arrive in Los Angeles on time. "Was thinking maybe some of the movies I watched this semester. Couple of books."

It somehow feels too impersonal despite the fact that these gifts would all be personal recommendations from Matt. He'd write notes. He'd give genre and vague plot explanations. But books and movies are almost too easy. One of those routine gifts. Ben deserves better than that.

Though, maybe he doesn't. He's skipping out on Christmas. Skipping out on Matt. Skipping out on cookies and traditions and Boston.

"He'd like that," Kyle smiles, pats Matt's knee like he needs reassurance or something.

He doesn't. (He does, God, he absolutely does.)

“Yeah,” Matt agrees, crumples up his wrapper and stuff it into his front pocket. “Kinda wish he was coming, though, y’know?”

“I know, yeah. Me, too,” he assures him, taking a sharp left. “Have you thought about inviting Michelle?”

“Yeah, I don’t know, dude,” Matt admits quickly, picking at his nails and staring ahead through the windshield. “She’s just— I dunno. Not sure if I want her to meet ma yet. Is that really fucked?”

Kyle frowns but shrugs at the same time, like he’s trying to make up his mind. “How long have you guys been going out now?”

“Something like six months, I guess.”

“Alright.” He narrows his eyes as he drives, purses his mouth to the side. “Why the hesitation?”

“Jesus, am I on trial here?” Matt laughs and drops his foot from the dash. “Just— You met her. She’s perfect, man.”

(“You must be Kyle,” Michelle said with a smile, bright, holding out a hand to Kyle.

They were mid-packing when Michelle had rolled in. Matt thought this was incredibly annoying.

Kyle stood up and took her hand, shook gently before quickly returning to sorting books into academic and non-academic, talking from below. “Michelle, right?”

“Yeah! So nice to meet you,” she meant it, her smile all genuine and natural. “I’m just— I was wondering if you guys need any help at all?”

Matt stood up and dusted his hands, drew a kiss to her cheek. “I think we’re doing alright, almost done,” he assured her, tugging at the Harvard sweater she’d taken from him a few days ago. “You’re welcome to hang around.”

She took a beat and looked around, the floors and walls mostly bare. “That’s okay,” she decided, kissed him quickly and ran a hand through his grown-out hair. “I’ve gotta catch the train anyway. Parents are going all out for my big return,” she laughed, rolling her eyes.

“Where do your folks live?” Kyle asked, made conversation like he always did, skillful in his small talk.

“Providence. So it’s not too bad. About an hour and a half all-in,” she noted, and Matt saw her contemplating sitting down and continuing the conversation.

“Oh, nice, nice. I love Providence. You ever been to the RISD museum?” Kyle asked, continuing to speak while he packed away books.

Matt squeezed Michelle’s shoulder and gave her a smile and a nod despite being annoyed that he couldn’t move forward in silence, moving to the back of the room to finalize taking down his posters and tucking sweatshirts away.

Michelle took a seat anyway. “Yes! God, that place is— My parents used to take my sister and I there for this, like, family art-making thing. I still have a couple of the drawings. One really shitty mug,” she laughed and rested her chin on her palm. “I haven’t been in forever.”

“You should go! Revisit your childhood,” Kyle proposed enthusiastically. “My girlfriend and I saw an exhibit on fashion in the 60s there, like, last year. They’ve always got really poignant exhibitions.”

Poignant. God, Matt wanted to smack him. He settled for a chuckle into his sleeve.

“Y’know what, I think I will. Now that I can actually appreciate it.”

“Yes! Yeah, I mean— I used to love museum daytrips when I was a kid because it meant time off of school—”

“— But you never really took it in, *yes,* exactly. I mean, what were we supposed to do with, like, Buddhist sculptures being described by a suicidal fifth grade history teacher?” She laughed, loud, and Matt usually enjoyed hearing that laugh, thought it was sweet how little noise control she had, but that day he just wanted to tell her to go catch that fucking train.

But Kyle laughed, too, quipped in something else, something Matt was content with blocking out in favor of picking at a crusty dried sauce stain on one of his sweatshirts.

She really was perfect. Affable. Interesting. Well-spoken.)

“You don’t want that tainted?” Kyle asks, suggests, like an easy answer.

Matt knows that's not his answer. It's something more on the edge of *if she's so perfect, why don't I fear what may happen if we don't last; why are the lights getting dimmer instead of brighter?*

But he shrugs. "I guess."

"Yeah, I mean, makes sense," he offers back uselessly, turning into the parking lot. "When are you guys exchanging gifts if she's in Providence right now?"

"I've got no clue," Matt snorts out a laugh, searches for a parking spot alongside Kyle in this monstrously packed lot. "She said Christmas is a big fuckin' deal for her folks. So I'm guessing on the 26th or so, whenever she gets back," he postulates, craning his neck. "Oh, here, here," he shoots, pointing at a spot slightly ahead.

"Too narrow," Kyle tsks, keeps going. He follows Matt's line of logic with a nod of understanding, entering another row of spots with none to spare. "Y'know you don't *have* to keep seeing her, right?" He drops casually, turns on his blinker as a car to their left starts to pull out of its spot.

"The fuck is that supposed to mean?" Matt scoffs, leans over and honks the horn twice because the idiot they're supposed to be grabbing their parking from is moving at a glacial pace.

Kyle smacks his hand from the wheel, shoves his shoulder and holds up an apologetic hand to the elderly woman driving. "Just— You seem all detached when you talk about her. Bored, or something. And that's fine, man, we've all been there. But you don't have to date her just to have someone to date, or whatever."

Matt scoffs again, kind of can't believe his ears, and slumps back in his seat. His arms cross on instinct, protecting himself from further commentary. He's not quite so cruel; he does not date for the pure sake of it. Really. There are so many things to love about Michelle. And he does, he does love them. Like them. Those many things. Matt enjoys many things about Michelle: her easy snoring after she's had a few, her need for ski socks regardless of the weather, her pinchy focus face, her tendency to chew on her dead ends while she studies. There are many things. You can't just enjoy that many things about someone without dating them with purpose, with feeling.

"And I'm not saying it to be a dick, man, I swear. But you gotta, I dunno, be honest with yourself." He finally pulls into the spot.

“Yeah, sure,” Matt snorts out a laugh. “Fine, whatever, thanks for the useless counsel. Let’s just get these stupid fuckin’ gifts and get the fuck out of here.” He opens up the passenger door and leaves the foil packet of his Pop Tarts on the car’s floor out of spite.

“Stop being a baby,” Kyle retorts, jogging after locking up the car to catch up with Matt. “I’m not saying anything about your character or whatever. But you gotta be careful. She’s a real person—”

“Gee, thank you,” he laughs, tucking his balled-up fists into his coat pockets. “I had no clue! You’ve really enlightened me.” He pushes past a crowd of loud teenagers and keeps his gaze strictly in front of him.

Kyle’s implication that he is treating Michelle like an object is, shockingly, not very welcomed. Mostly because it’s absolutely ridiculous. Of course she’s a real person, of course Matt will not stick around if it becomes obvious that he’s just dragging her along. He’s decent. She’s not an object. She’s a whole person – a whole person who could also leave Matt, may he add. Kyle is acting as if she’s got no agency of her own. As if Matt’s pulling a very visible string and she’s just letting it happen.

A hand grabs his shoulder and turns him around forcefully. “You know I didn’t mean it like that,” he sighs, claws his hand into Matt’s coat. “Just want you to be happy, man. It’s okay if she doesn’t do that for you. That’s all I meant.”

Matt shakes the hand off, furrows his brow.

There’s something about sibling-fighting that doesn’t hold up. Matt has never quite been able to figure out what it is. He can hold a grudge against Ben for weeks, can refuse to speak meaningfully to him for days; but any argument he and Kyle have is swept away quickly, killed and buried, before it can even pick up any real steam.

Kyle knows him in a different way than Ben does. Not less, not more, just differently. He can say things Ben holds in, is allowed to be loose with his script, takes advantage of the fact that Matt will invariably be stuck with him for life.

(A few times, Ben has slipped up and performed in ways he shouldn’t have, according to the invisible social contract everybody signs once they’re reasonably aware of themselves. The contract Matt, himself, has followed pretty well.

Like the weekend after he graduated high school and barged in on

Matt getting dressed to go to the basketball court. He stood in the doorway for a second too long, looked Matt up and down and startled him as he spoke.

“You look fuckin’ good, dude,” he’d said, walked over to Matt and casually but resolutely pressed his warm palm to Matt’s deltoid. He squeezed. He wet his lips with a peek of his tongue.

Matt froze, didn’t dare look down at the squeezing hand, pretended to feel normal as Ben started running his hand down Matt’s arm. “Thanks,” he hurried out, burning alive, not even sure why. He’d felt all clumsy then, like he was the one being fucking weird and close.

“Can I come?”

Matt’s lips parted in confusion, decidedly not staring down at Ben’s mouth, at his stupidly adorable wonky teeth, at the mole standing above his upper lip. “What?” He decided on, keeping it simple, and felt Ben’s hand come back up to loosely massage his shoulder.

“Basketball,” Ben answered loosely, like his own inquiry was second on his mind. He looked down at Matt’s torso again; wolf-whistled. “No idea why you’re not getting any, dude.”

“Fuck off,” Matt scoffed, felt the humiliated flush form into blossoms against his skin, and finally found it in himself to break away. “I *am* getting some, bitch.”

Ben stepped back and threw his hands up in defeat, smiled as if analyzing Matt’s abs didn’t mean anything, shouldn’t mean anything, and chuckled vaguely into his wrist. “Fine, you’re swimming in pussy. My bad,” he laughed again, side-stepped to get away from Matt’s weak swing of retaliation into his direction. “Can I come?” He re-emphasized, impatient, still staring as Matt tugged a shirt on.

“Yeah, that’s— Sure. You met Alan, right?”

“Hot Chinese dude, yeah. We met.”)

“Yeah, yeah,” he mutters, turns on his heel to continue walking to the double doors covered in leeching tween girls giggling at his approach. “You coming or what?”

Kyle jogs forward, wraps an arm around Matt’s shoulder. “Michelle first?” He grins, knowingly, and gains a deserved side-eye from Matt.

The mall right before Christmas is not for the weak. Unbearably loud music is barely breaking over the equally excruciating blend of hundreds of voices trying to gain an edge. Santa Claus is front and center surrounded by an unorganized flock of children and their matching adults behind weak barriers. Decorations have been torn down, either with malicious intent or by simple accident, and are scattered desperately across the linoleum as if shouting for help. There is barely enough room to breathe. Barely enough room to think logically, clearly, about gift-giving. Maybe that's intentional. Or just a solemn benefit for the corporations; if you can't hear yourself think, there's no room for rationalization — everything becomes a yes for the express purpose of ending the gyrating buzz.

Matt doesn't come here often — or, at least, hasn't been here in a goddamn while. He doesn't have the lay of the land everybody surrounding him seems to have. This makes him vaguely deer-like as others dash past him and Kyle, new-born, standing unsupported and panicky, watching two teenagers share a kiss in the corner, three friends stagger up the escalator.

The directory in front of them is partially occupied. People are standing in front of it with drool dripping from the corners of their mouths like it's a form of entertainment to block a person in need of locating a department store, taking up as much space as humanly possible. Matt is getting little peeks of the map in between an elderly couple seemingly taking turns pointing at every single store.

"Where the fuck is Macy's?" He poses to Kyle, nodding towards the directory. When Kyle chuckles, Matt reevaluates. "Macy's is— I can get her something from Macy's, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's not—" Kyle chuckles again, and Matt is becoming slightly ticked = off, but Kyle grabs him by the shoulders from behind and turns him forty-five degrees until he's suddenly face-to-face with Macy's plain writing and the oversized entrance. "Should we check over there?"

Unavoidably, Matt smacks the back of his head. "Yeah, hilarious. Let's fuckin' go."

By Kyle's direct and ostensibly confident guidance, they eventually end up at the jewelry counter. And now Matt is left with the realization that he's gotta spend some dough, some considerable dough, on a girl he may not be in love with.

But that's fine. Working as a tutor and picking up shifts at the movie theater when possible, not to mention the checks he's gotten from small roles, hasn't done Ben and his bank account any significant damage; he's got money to spend, really, and this is a fine place to do so. He'll just have to explain the charge.

Once they've passed the much-too-lengthy line of other last-minute gift-shoppers, Matt is suddenly faced with an admittedly beautiful young woman behind the counter.

She wears her long blonde hair in a tight ponytail, bangs cut blunt, lips coated in some crimson lipstick she's probably paid to promote. It does great things for her complexion, however, lets her pale skin contrast to the stark notes. Her eyes are down-turned and a deep brown, her cheeks flushed from the lack of proper climate control. She's smiling, wide but somehow sincere, though Matt realizes this is likely a front, nobody could be smiling sincerely after even fifteen minutes behind a counter like this.

After a decent few seconds of staring, Matt realizes that, well, he's staring, and he coughs into his coat sleeve. "Hi, hello, how— uh, how are you?" He asks, lamely, hears Kyle by his side snort ironically. He meets it with an elbow.

But the girl at the counter smiles, lays her hands flat on the glass surface in front of her. "I'm well! Doing well. Always crazy before the holidays." She lets out an exasperated but animated sigh, motioning wordlessly at the chaos around them. "Anyway — how can I help? What are we looking for today?"

"Right, yes, I'm looking for something for my girlfriend. Something that won't stain her skin."

The girl, — young woman, really — Elise, her nametag reads, laughs softly, nodding as if she's had plenty of experience. "We don't sell anything that'll stain her skin, so don't worry." She begins pulling things out already. "Do you know her birthday?"

"Yeah, of course. It's March nineteenth," he quickly answers, mostly so he doesn't look a fool in front of Kyle who seems to believe that *he* believes Michelle is some kind of insentient entity.

"March, hmm…" She whispers to herself, takes a few steps back in her booth and scours a revolving rack before quirking up. "Okay, yes, perfect," the whispering continues as she pulls out a matching set of earrings and a necklace. She paces back to the front of the counter,

lays out a few options in front of him.

“Right, so, her birthstone is aquamarine,” she starts, pointing at the set she just pulled out. The earrings have little blue-green gems in them; the necklace has a pendant of the same type. “Something a little more personalized than maybe one of the other choices,” she emphasizes, pointing at the charm bracelet and other two necklaces she pulled out. “It’s also a *little bit* pricier.”

Matt looks at the set. It’s significantly more appealing than his other options. The charm bracelet is cute, but she’s got one already; he got her a charm for their one-month anniversary. He reaches for the necklace — “May I?”

“Yes, yeah, of course. Feel free,” she smiles, nods.

He holds the delicate silver chain in his hand, thumbs across the stone. It’s undoubtedly pretty. “A little bit pricier means how much pricier, exactly?”

“Well, these, ” she gently points, with a flat, closed hand, at the necklaces he’s not holding, “are about forty. I was guessing you’d want something a bit special for your girlfriend, but I can always pull out some more affordable options if—”

“No, no, that’s fine. Yeah. I mean. Christmas only comes once a year, right?” He puts the necklace down, clasps his hands together.

“Right, yes, exactly,” she nods, and then points at the set. “And this one, earrings and necklace included, is gonna run you about one-twenty. It also comes with a little card explaining her birthstone, if you wanna see it?”

“That’s okay, thank you, I’ll trust you with that one,” he smiles quickly.

He glances over at Kyle, clenching his jaw. There was not exactly a desire to spend one hundred and twenty dollars on just one gift when he walked into the mall today. “What d’you think?” He asks, biting down on the scaly skin of his bottom lip.

Kyle takes a step towards the counter and looks at the options. “I mean, she’d definitely appreciate it.”

Pursing his lips, Matt grabs the little box with the earrings inside. It is not lost on him that there are at least seven people waiting behind

him; before about three minutes ago, he was one of those people. But it's loud, and the lights are daggers to his skin, and Elise is pleasant and beautiful, and the thought of finding anything else is almost as nauseating as just spending the goddamn money. "It's not too much?" He decides to ask, referring to the cost or the sentiment or all of it, because he really isn't quite sure.

Kyle shrugs. "Depends. Are you gonna stay together?"

Matt scoffs, then turns back to Elise and nods. "I'll take it."

And now comes the hard part, he thinks, little Macy's bag in hand, walking back out into the jungle of mall-hallways.

Ben. What could he possibly get for Ben?

Books and movies are fine. He'll grab those for him from his own collection; after very little pondering, Matt has decided books and movies are exactly the kind of low-effort but personal gift Ben deserves.

So then *why* does he feel guilty about it? Like it's not enough?

"I don't know what else to get him," Matt groans as they aimlessly make their way up the escalators.

Kyle tuts in thought, eyes down the stores as they pass them. "You're doing the books, too?" He asks to make sure as Matt watches him almost run into a loud and clumsy child.

"Yeah, I think so. Books and movies. But it's— I dunno, it feels inadequate," he sighs, stops in front of the Musicland and fingers at the entrance's ridges.

"I think, maybe, you're overthinking it," Kyle smiles all endeared like Matt is providing anything to be endeared by. "It's just Ben. He kinda sucks at gift-giving anyway. You're not gonna offend him."

"I know," Matt hurries out, rejects the idea that it's *just* Ben but can't really put it into words. His fingers instinctively move to pinch at the bridge of his nose in frustration. "Just— What if he senses that I'm pissed at him for not coming down through my lackluster gift?"

It's not even a thought that had formed fully in his brain, but it spills out regardless. He cringes at himself, at his own sincerity, aiming his gaze closely to the ground instead of Kyle's face likely contorting into

some form of amusement.

“I think it’s sweet you care,” Kyle says, which is even worse than anything Matt himself has said, and continues, “but it’s genuinely a very considerate gift. I mean it.”

Matt bites the inside of his cheek, shuffles his shoes, and nods slowly. “Fine,” he concedes, only partially satisfied. “Should we go get some fuckin’ ornaments, then?”

“That’s the spirit,” Kyle responds, wraps an arm around Matt’s shoulder and gets them walking again. “We should check the antique store on Broadway.”

“You kidding me?” Matt snorts. “Let’s just get the bulk ones from that decor place. It’s on the first floor.”

Though not visible, Matt can feel Kyle rolling his eyes.

“Fine, fine. You’re falling on the sword if they’re hideous.”

“Deal.”

They’re fairly hideous.

Cheap-looking, at least, but their mom still manages to feign appreciation when they bring back the box of fifty. No sword-falling needed.

It’s fine. They’ll blend in with the rest of the ornaments. Nobody’s gonna know the goddamn difference, they all reason together. If someone *does* notice the difference, they better keep their shallow mouth shut. Decoration-related comments should be limited to admiration.

With shopping out of the way, Matt finds time to hone in on his gift for Ben.

Three books.

The Waves, Virginia Woolf — *The isolation that comes with growing apart beyond childhood. I promise I’m not implying anything here. I just think you’d appreciate it. And Woolf’s prose is ????!!!?!???!!!!!!!! That basically covers it.*

Pale Fire, Vladimir Nabokov — *A book made practically entirely out of*

footnotes. It's personal commentary on a 999-line poem written for the book. Unexpectedly funny. I don't even wanna tell you more. Also, essentially: I need to talk to someone about this. You came to mind.

A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man, James Joyce — *A lot of this book is about indoctrination, a lot of it is about self-discovery. It's very alive. I read this for class and mentioned you in group discussions twice. See if you can find out when.*

Once mostly satisfied with his recommendations and choosing to not get weird about sending off books with annotations in them, Matt sticks the accompanying sticky notes on the covers and wraps them semi-haphazardly.

Movies are a bit harder. He does not own as many DVDs as he wishes, and writing out a list of films for Ben to go and find feels like homework. So. He settles, somewhat.

GoodFellas — Gangsters. Robert De Niro. Enough said. I first watched this in a packed theater and really wished you had been there. I hope you still haven't seen this even though you promised you would when I called you raving about it.

The Kid — Found this cheap as fuck previously-viewed quality at Blockbuster and gave it a go since we loved The Great Dictator. It's fantastic. Tragic and sweet and hilarious. In simplest terms: Who should take care of this goddamn kid? And the answer is clear. To us. Watch it with someone if you can. Lots to talk about.

The Exterminating Angel — A bunch of elitists get inexplicably trapped in a room. Fucking awesome. One of those movies that reminds me what film can do. You'll love it :)

Shakily, with a vision of his ceaseless sincerity making him toss his Christmas gift entirely, he packs up the DVDs with their matching notes and lays it all aside. He needs a box or something to ship this all out in; it's created a little pile of feelings and desires resting in a corner with an obvious, still silhouette.

Matt takes a breath, a break, leans back in his chair and writes something quick to bite back at his own need for attention, or something:

You might have read these already or seen these already. If that's the case, don't tell me. Just give it a few days and then call me to talk about them. Much appreciated.

Merry Christmas, bitch.

And as if on instinct, he saunters over to his bed and lifts the phone's receiver. Dialing Ben's number is second nature by this point.

After two rings, he's met with an obnoxious smacking against his ear. "What's up?" Open-mouth-eater Ben asks.

"My gift's not gonna come on time," Matt says immediately, plops himself down on his bed. "I'd say sorry, but I'm actually not sorry at all."

Ben cackles and burps off to the side to spare Matt the details. "Don't worry about it. You send it yet?"

"No. Just finished wrapping."

"Cool, yeah. That's— Send it after Christmas. They're so fuckin' busy right now it's probably gonna return-to-sender or something," he figures, smacks his lips together again.

Matt moves the receiver to his other ear and rolls onto his side. "Yeah, good idea," he emphasizes, chews on a slightly-grown corner of one of his nails. "I spent $120 at the mall, by the way. For your ledger."

"Jesus Christ," Ben coughs. "On my gift?"

Matt snorts. "No, prick. On Michelle's gift." He eyes back at the gifts he packages for Ben and is hit with self-disappointment. "You think I'd ever drop that much on your cheap ass?"

"I was hoping, sure," he responds, slow, voice almost syrupy, smile clear through his words. "I don't keep a ledger, by the way. I'm not fifty years old."

"Idiot," Matt dishes quickly, softly scratching at a spot below his belly button. "Someone's gonna slowly rob you blind and you won't have a clue."

"C'est la vie," Ben concludes easily, laughing at himself. There's a quick pause, the sound of shuffling on the other end. "What'd you get Michelle?"

"Necklace and earrings with her, uh, birthstone in them. On them."

"Pretty fuckin' penny," Ben whistles out.

“Yeah,” Matt snorts, sighs. He hesitates to say more, spill what he’s told Kyle, mouth opening a sliver before closing again, gasping at a small breath.

Ben gives him space to think, always does, even through a telephone line with no logical way to extract emotion through silence. This is — and, God, he feels weird for thinking it, but it’s true — what is missing with Michelle. The penetrating understanding that manages to drive itself into any conversation. The relaxed analysis of broadened silence coming forth without a drive for it. It just exists. It seems like it always has.

With Ben, there was very little adjusting time. After he stopped being possessive about high school theater — and, fine, yeah, a little bit jealous of Ben — they fell into a rhythm pretty easily. Like they were part of some undiscovered “we,” they could read each other as plainly as text.

Maybe that’s a best friend thing. Matt doesn’t know. He sure would like to have it with Michelle. Any girl. Something akin to it, even.

But he doesn’t want to discuss this right now. Not really. And he’s afraid of drawing conclusions, happy and comfortable in the carved-out space reserved for his illusion-brain, so there will be another time for something in earnest. This is not that. He shoves Ben's understanding aside.

“That’s all,” Matt says quickly, perhaps to make up for the several seconds of silence. “I just wanted to call and let you know.”

“Sure, yeah, that’s— Thanks for the heads up,” Ben responds, sounding similarly corporate all of a sudden, coughing into his fist. “Hey, I’ll call you soon, okay? I got an audition in a couple of hours.”

“Sure. Sure, sounds good. Good luck. And... I’ll— Call me whenever. I’m home all-the-fucking-time now. So. Pretty free,” Matt rushes out, so goddamn awkward, silenced by his own sudden ideas of impulse.

“Alright. Yeah, bye, Matty. Bye.” He lets the word teeter out before hanging up, all so slow and contained.

Matt feels something build inside his stomach that he isn’t quite sure where to place, or what to name. Some form of guilt, maybe; to whom or what, he isn’t positive. Talking to Ben in clipped sentences drives him insane. It always has. It always means something is wrong with one, or both, of them.

Something is wrong with him and he doesn't even know what. He's unable to procure the resources to tell him, exactly, what is so fucking wrong. The pit in his stomach grows, inadequacies running amok, staring at the phone blaring its dial tone. Ben is no longer there. Matt is left alone to figure out what the bad thing, the bad feeling, is.

It's Michelle. It's related to her, at least. Everything Kyke said is lodged in the back of his ever-expanding stomach-pit, plugging it up.

He does not see her as an object. He is not stringing her along. He likes her. He likes spending time with her, talking to her, going out with her.

("C'mere," Matt said raspily, leaning forward in bed to just barely run a hand across Michelle's hipbone as she stood in his dorm room and filed through his desk's copious texts.

She turned around and stepped forward with a postcard he'd gotten from Ben earlier that week, ran a hand through Matt's hair while reading as he nosed at her bare waist, wrapped his arms around her. "He's lonely," she concluded, holding up the postcard for emphasis, and stared down at him with a pouty bottom lip.

Matt rolled his eyes. "He's fine. He's melodramatic," he said, tried to avoid feeling guilty, and kissed beside her belly button.

Ben's postcard had been more mushy than usual. Any note that ends with *love you* is worth following up on.

"You should go visit him," she offered, scratching at his scalp. "I know you miss him, too."

"It's a long drive," Matt mumbled into her skin, pulled her forward until her knees made contact with the bed frame.

"That's why they invented planes." She put the postcard down neatly and rubbed her palms across his shoulders.

"Fuckin' hate planes," he muttered. "He's coming for Christmas. I'll see him soon."

She nodded in approval. "I'll get to meet him?"

He nodded in agreement. "Definitely.")

And then there's Ben, infecting every conversation he has. It's

impossible to go a day without mentioning him. They've been through too much together, have seen too much of one another, for that to be avoidable. This should not have anything to do with Michelle.

And yet, it does.

He compares them in any way possible, barely notices that he's doing it until it's so obvious it becomes nuclear. Michelle has some perceived deficit and Ben doesn't.

Matt keeps staring at the dial-tone-ringing phone, pierces his lips together remembering how short he was with Ben, how fucked it feels that talking to Ben, the only person who could possibly really and sincerely help him, about Michelle feels like imploding. He can't talk about Michelle without thinking about Ben. He can't understand why this is.

So instead of finding ways to pathologize that behavior, that thinking, he slams the receiver back down and gets up from bed. There is no time for probing.

There is no *need* for probing.

Chapter 3: 3. Lights

Chapter Summary

> His mother tuts, wraps an arm around his shoulder and squeezes. “I know you’re missing Ben.” It’s said close to a secret, all quiet and hesitant. “Sorry he won’t be here,” she attempts, no aid in her words beyond comfort. Everybody can be sad all the time without effects.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Matt is not very good at cutting onions.

His mother does not care; he’s on onion duty for a dish he’s not even allowed to eat because it’s going straight to her bookclub’s final meeting of the year. Also known as: the meeting where everybody shows off by making complicated dishes despite being horrifically stressed about the upcoming holidays.

He’s got swim goggles on. The calcified spots are clouding his vision, but he can’t exactly blame his lack of skills on that. This is a much larger issue.

She peers over his shoulder. “Honey, the chicken’s all ready to go, but I can’t start the sauce without—”

“I know, ma. But I’ll chop a finger off if I go any faster,” he answers with a huff, dicing slowly. It doesn’t help that the pieces need to be smaller than his fucking fingernail. “Can’t Kyle take over?”

“He’s still on the phone. How many onions have you done?” She pulls the chicken from the stove as she speaks, sets it on the rack to rest.

Matt looks at the peels, checks his work. “Two. Well, almost. This is the second one.”

She sighs offensively, plugging an immediate scoff and side-eye from Matt. “Okay, okay, sorry. Finish this one, and I’ll… I’ll call Kyle down to do the last two.” She wipes her hands on a dish towel, and plants a laughing kiss on his cheek. “Thank you for helping, Matty. Thank you.”

“Is this for tonight?” He asks tepidly, ignoring her practical condescension, and continues dicing carefully.

“Tomorrow night. It’s better when it sits for a bit.” She moves around, dumps a bunch of spices in a little dish to mix, and places it beside the stove. “Are you going to be doing anything tomorrow?”

Matt turns the onion sideways on the last little bit, scoops his finished bits into the ceramic bowl beside him. If Ben were here, he *would* be doing something tomorrow. Maybe they’d watch a shitty Christmas movie, or go to the rink. Maybe they’d drop by Ben’s place and play video games with Casey, exchange pleasantries with Chris. Something. Anything. But, as it stands, he’s pretty much on his own. So he shrugs. “Not really,” he answers eventually, after what must have been considerable consideration, because he’s somehow finished the rest of his dreaded onion without much thought.

His mother tuts, wraps an arm around his shoulder and squeezes. “I know you’re missing Ben.” It’s said close to a secret, all quiet and hesitant. “Sorry he won’t be here,” she attempts, no aid in her words beyond comfort. Everybody can be sad all the time without effects.

There is a part of him that is content with shrugging this off, with pretending that he does not actually care at all, that he’s not missing Ben’s loud frame all up in his personal space; but a much more available part of him is already tired of the holidays like this. Just constant comparing. And, fine, maybe he’s longing for Ben’s presence beyond the context of the holidays. Maybe he hasn’t seen him in, God, six months? At least. And maybe that’s weighing on him, making him get all irregular and headached. It’s strange, alright, being without him for this long. That’s all. That’s— It’s simply familiarity.

Regardless, he shrugs her attempt at comfort off gently, not interested in the woe-is-me of not having his best friend at Christmas. “It’s— it’s fine. We managed before him, didn’t we?” He laughs, tries to, at least, and takes off his goggles.

(It was simple. Four years ago, Matt had asked: “Can Ben come on Christmas Eve?”

And his mother had smiled, and easily said, “Of course.”

And it was simple.

“Yeah, fuck you, as *if* you’re gonna buy Pennsylvania Ave,” Ben laughed boisterously in disbelief, genuinely ripping the money Matt

was shelling out to the bank [Aunt Judy] for purchase out of his hands.

Matt cackled, elbowed his ribs and climbed across Ben's lap to reach for his hard-earned money back. "Make me a good fuckin' deal next round and you'll get it!"

"Boys!" His mom shouted, trying to stifle her laughter while sipping from a tall glass of Chablis. Their heads both turned to her, mid-money grasp. "Settle down," she murmured, smile barely hidden, nudging her head not-so-subtly towards her parents making vaguely distasteful faces across from her.

Ben paused, and Matt took the time to snatch his money back, turning subtly red. "Sorry," he cowered, sneakily sly about regaining his riches. "And I'm buying Pennsylvania Ave, Aunt Judy. Hand 'er over," he grimaced, staring directly at Ben as he said it before continuing to count out the amount needed.

Ben leaned over and whispered, "you're a fuckin' dick," warm into his ear before taking a big gulp of his one allotted beer.)

"Yes we did," his mom agrees, smiling, ruffles his hair. "Can you go get your brother over here? Tell him he's racking up my phone bill."

Matt walks off without a confirmation, mostly to get away from the squeeze she has on his head, and skips steps up the stairs.

There is no jealousy felt regarding Lori coming over. There isn't. It's a totally different situation.

He gets to Kyle's door and puts his ear to the wood, hearing soft chatter on the other end. His knuckles bear up and knock down twice, waiting for a response.

"Yeah?" Kyle shouts through the closed door.

"Ma needs your help downstairs!" Matt shouts back, no longer interested in being soft like he was originally intending. "And get off the damn phone. It's expensive." Rather than moving on to his own bedroom, Matt leans against the wall beside Kyle's door and waits for him to hang up and come out. What the fuck else is he gonna do with his time?

There's a quiet, "you hang up first, no… *you,* I love you, okay, yes, yes, I gotta go, I love you, see you soon, bye, babe, bye," before Kyle

swings open the door and is briefly shocked by Matt's crossed arms and slouch.

"Phone's expensive, huh?" Kyle snorts, flicks Matt's forehead.

Matt smacks his hand away quickly and flicks him back. "Yeah, dickhead."

"Those costs disappear when you're up chatting with Ben at two in the morning?" He teases, jabs at Matt's waist while walking backwards.

Matt resists turning red. He wills his body not to. Instead, his hands become daggers into Kyle's ribcage. "Yeah, they do, actually. Special fuckin' plan," he laughs back, follows Kyle downstairs until he can hear their mom shouting at them to stop being children, something you never quite unlearn how to be, pausing in the pit of the living room. "Have fun chopping onions!"

Kyle turns up his middle finger and grabs the goggles with clear disdain, grabbing the knife Matt was holding earlier and fitting easily into place.

The stairs are creaky and half-rotten; this has been a constant in Matt's life since childhood. It's the one project they always leave for the unfeasible "tomorrow."

He remembers dropping his freshly-won collection of marbles down the steps, the pattering clear in his mind, pouring down until they rolled across the hardwood he came in on. There was one missing when he got back upstairs, this little watermelon-looking chipped thing he won from Evan Greer, though he swore he looked everywhere, continues looking whenever he recalls.

The creaking is light now as he takes a seat on the steps and rests his cheek against the railing's bars, eyes scanning the hallway, the open door into the living room, the peek he can get inside the kitchen, hoping for the green rind of the lost marble to make itself obvious. Always waiting for things to be obvious. Maybe the marble ran away years ago and he's been keeping it trapped here in his mind, disallowing its rolling freedom for his own selfish interest. Comfort, maybe — where does something go when we stop looking for it?

Matt takes a shaky breath in and disallows a connection. Ben is not a marble. He has not run away.

So, Matt dusts himself off, momentarily and consciously decides to

stop looking for the marble, and makes his way back up the steps. “I’m gonna call Michelle. Stay off the line!” He shouts down before he can pretend not to hear a protest, toeing into his room and picking the receiver up quickly.

He opens up his bedside drawer and reveals the post-it she gave him with her home phone number on it alongside a lopsided little heart. The little things make it all so important, so shiny. His thumb pads over the ink, sends a quiet message to the rest of his body.

(“I don’t wanna,” Matt moaned in complaint, wrapped tightly around her side, leg swung across her leg.

Michelle smiled sneakily and ran a hand through his hair, scratching at the deepest part of his hairline. “It’ll be fun.”

“*This* is fun,” he insisted, squeezed her closer, landing a soft kiss on her bare shoulder. “We can just stay here, Chelle. Feign illness.”

“Matt,” she laughed, untangled a knot in his hair. “We didn’t show up last time, either. She’s gonna think you don’t like her.”

“*I do,* I’m just— who the hell does a monthly friend dinner?” He laughed with a whininess in the back of his voice.

She flicked the back of his head. “Hey, I think it’s sweet.” She rubbed the spot she flicked and kissed his forehead. “We’re all busy. It’s nice to make time for each other.”

He sighed, rested his chin on top of his hand and looked up at her. She was extra beautiful just after five o’clock, the edges of her eyes, her mouth, more relaxed and truthful. Her smile became almost generous, fully conscious and earned. “You really want me to come?”

She smiled that generous smile and nodded. “I’d love it if you did,” she whispered, rubbed her thumb against his cheekbone.

He canted his head to the side and kissed the pad of her thumb. “We’re grabbing beer on the way.”

“Absolutely.”

“And we’re out by ten.”

She smiled, brought his face up to her own by framing her hands against his cheeks. “Perfect.”)

He dials the home phone and waits for the rings to give way to a greeting.

“Hello?”

Matt flinches at the sound of an older man’s voice, quickly attempting to regain composure. “Hi! Hey, how are you? I’m— Uh, I’m looking for Michelle?”

“Are you perchance the famed Matthew?” The man asks quietly, and Matt lets a smile slip immediately.

“I suppose I am,” he laughs, scratching at his eyebrow, unsure exactly how to proceed in this conversation. “Are you Michelle’s father?”

The man laughs, which Matt takes as a no. “Grandfather! Her father is outside fixing some flickering Christmas lights. Heaven forbid, right?”

He nods, uselessly. “Right, yeah. She told me you guys go all out,” he comments, to show that he pays attention, and leans against the headboard.

“Oh, we certainly do. I’ll make sure she brings you some nice photographs. And maybe you could join us next year—”

In the background, Matt hears Michelle— “PopPop, who’s on the phone?”

“We’ve been found out,” her grandfather whispers into the phone. It earns him a little chuckle from Matt. “I’ll hand you over now, son. Good talking to you.”

“Yeah, yes. You, too, sir. Thank you,” he rushes out, unsure if grandpa is even still in possession of the phone.

After some shuffling, some whispering, Michelle softly asks, “Matt?”

“Hey,” he responds, smile already creeping onto his face. “Thought I’d call. See how it’s going.”

“It’s total fucking chaos,” she sighs, but Matt can tell it’s the kind of sigh that’s secretly fond. “How about you, how are you? Is Ben there yet?”

He sinks a little, eyelids flickering. “No, uh… He’s not coming, I guess. Told me a few days ago. Guess I forgot to mention it. Says he’s busy and all.”

There's some shuffling on her side, a door closing. "Oh, baby, that's… How are you feeling?"

He eyes the books and DVDs he packed up on his desk across the room that Ben won't receive until well into the New Year. A small fuck-you for the frustration.

But he shrugs. He's not— This phone call wasn't supposed to be about Ben. "It's fine, I'm more pissed off at him than anything," he chuckles, partial honesty, and picks at his nail.

"You can be sad, too, you know?" She assures him, and he imagines her hand against the side of his face, soothing. "I know you were excited."

He shrugs again. "Yeah. Yeah, but it's— It happens. It's okay, really," he insists, taking a small beat to give the words space but not enough for Michelle to start reassuring him again — "Your grandfather said the lights got all messed up outside?"

The soft sigh on the other end is communicative of so much; Matt is aware she wants to dig into this, wants to talk more intently and purposefully about his feelings despite his own lack of interest. But his feelings aren't unusual here. Nothing that can't be assumed. Matt is absolutely fine with it all going assumed and unanswered.

The decision to leave it unanswered, however, seems like a difficult one for Michelle. She jumps into casual conversation with a subtle despondency. "Yeah, yeah. It's been flickering since yesterday."

"You try unplugging it and plugging it back in?" Matt laughs through an attempt at making his shitty joke sound sincere, fishes inside his jeans pocket and fishes out a pack of nearly-finished Marlboros.

"God, you're a genius. You sure you shouldn't be in Engineering?" She laughs back. "Oh, hey, my brother and I ended up going to RISD yesterday, actually."

"No shit! That's great, Chelle. How was it?" He asks, filter dangling from his lips, lighting the end quickly.

"Sorry, one second, Matt," she rushes out, quickly followed by a quiet mumbling away from the receiver of which Matt can only catch *soon,* and *outside.*

"Everything alright?" He asks after a sharp inhale, frowning.

“Yeah, yeah,” she answers quickly, unconvincingly. “Sorry, yes. Jesus, something about extra plates. Apparently the neighbor is coming over for Christmas dinner because his wife died last month and he’s— Mom, it’s fine, it’s just *Matt,* yes, yeah, I’ll get off the phone soon— God, I told you it gets crazy. I’m sorry.”

He smiles into the phone, strangely endeared. “No, don’t worry, babe. It’s— That sounds rough. Hey, I can call back another time, okay?”

She groans, and Matt imagines her running a hand through her hair, caramel hair peaking with finger traces. “Fuck, maybe. I’m so sorry. It was so sweet of you to call, seriously, and I’m— I wanna talk more. Tonight? I’ll call you. Shit, sorry, are you busy?”

He snorts. “Fuck am I gonna be busy with? Call me any time, yeah?”

“Yes. I— *Barry,* please get Cookie away from the— She can’t be in here!— I’ll call you, okay? Bye, sorry, bye, bye.”

And he’s alone again. Not really. Not ever really truly alone — his thoughts are always framed by kids playing outside, the TV running downstairs, even the wind weeping makes him decidedly less alone — but alone nonetheless.

He lies back, cigarette between his lips, takes a stark inhale and lets the ash land softly against his pillow. Missing Michelle is nice. Makes it easy to imagine not knowing her, easy to feel the absence, to gain the assurance that he probably does love her, or need her, or want her. That Ben hasn’t robbed him of understanding people besides him.

Hm. He ticks the thought for later, banks it into the imagined folder *That Was Strange* and takes another drag. Ben. He eyes the DVDs again, thinks about the notes, the letters, and promptly squeezes his lids shut.

Ben is not here. Matt does not know why this bothers him so much beyond annoyance.

It feels more like jealousy — this deep and ugly thing he’s trying to carve away at, to find the root of — but of who? The walls of Ben’s apartment? No, it’s more intimate than that. The party Ben will no doubt attend on New Years Eve; the people that will find him charming and disarming and handsome in ways Matt has known about for years. And it’s not only his to know, he’s fully aware, doesn’t need the self-judgement associated with the implication that he may be unaware, but he likes knowing it. Seeing it. Feeling it.

Whatever that means. He takes another drag, wipes his eyes with the balls of his palms, hoping it will somehow clear his head.

There's a knock on his doorframe.

Matt slowly lowers his hands and blinks a couple of times, revealing Kyle leaning against the frame with a quiet kind of smile. "Hi," Matt opens curiously, takes one last pull before putting the cigarette out in his ashtray.

"Hey," Kyle creatively responds, staying put in the inside doorframe. "So, uh," he coughs into a closed fist, his awkward cough.

"What is it, man?" Matt asks quickly, getting to the point, uninterested in this back-and-forth.

"You still… planning on making cookies Christmas Eve?" Kyle asks hesitantly, flinches into himself as if he's about to get beat for no reason.

Matt feels his face drop. "Kinda forgot that was already so soon," he half-mumbles, throat clogged. Two days until Christmas Eve. No time for Ben to change his mind. It's not a big deal.

("So…" Ben said, turning slowly from the cabinet door to Matt, "We don't have any flour."

Matt cackled immediately, like it was a practical joke, wiping his butter-stained hands on his apron. "I'm sorry, we don't have any fuckin' *flour?*"

Ben lowered the flour tin's empty mouth to show Matt, couldn't help a chuckle from slipping. "We've got no fuckin' flour."

They both stared at each other, eyebrows downturned in silent laughter, before they shouted, in synchrony, "*Kyle!*")

"I can join you," Kyle hurries out quickly. "If you want me to. I mean, I don't know if I'll be as useful as Ben, but I'll try."

As useful as Ben. That'll be easy. The guy gives up halfway through the first batch of gingersnaps.

Matt nods, smiles down as he twiddles his thumbs. "Yeah, yeah. That sounds good. I've got—" he rummages through his bedside drawer until he procures a Christmas-themed piece of lined paper with an

extensive list adopted after last years' unorganized debacle, “— this list of shit we need. You mind just checking the kitchen for everything? I can run out and get whatever we’re missing.”

Kyle paces forwards and gently grabs the sheet, perusing the lines. “Yeah. Of course. We can go together.”

“Cool,” Matt agrees, clears his throat, hates how much he feels like a pity case right now, as if *Ben* is some sort of trigger word and acknowledging his missing presence is sorely taboo. “Cool. Let me know when you’re ready. If we need anything. I think I got everything last week, but, y’know. Just in case.”

Kyle gives a thumbs up, lame but strangely human, and his footsteps fade into the stairs.

Matt turns back into his bed, rolls over to his side, and listens to the neighbors’ kids play among the lights outside. Still childlike. He wonders if they know they’ll never quite move on from this moment.

Chapter End Notes

> sorry this is so short. and so overdue. my semester is finally over (yay!) so I can hopefully get back to writing a bit more! ty all for ur lovely comments they rlly make my day every time :) :) :) !!

Chapter 4: 4. Neutral Violence

Chapter Summary

> Making the moves to figure something like that out is practically unfeasible; Ben isn't doing this to punish him, fine, he can acknowledge that, but Ben certainly isn't making it easy on him, either.
>
> An apology would have been nice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Hello?" Matt answers the phone groggy and rudely-awoken, rubbing his eyes loosely, limbs still only halfway to real. He's gotten used to this with Ben, the time difference setting them up for some disjointed communication. The morning is likely to bring his mother and Kyle's shared disdain for the late-night shrilling.

But, this time, it's not Ben — "Did I wake you up?" Michelle asks quietly. "Shit, I'm sorry, I can call back in the morning if—"

He rolls onto his side, holds the phone tightly to his ear. "No, no, it's okay. What's up?" He coughs, checks the alarm clock displaying a meager 1:21 A.M. "You okay?"

"I'm all good, I'm just— Things got so busy I didn't have time to call you back."

Matt's eyes remain closed, hoping this will somehow be over soon, just needing the extra few hours of sleep before Kyle and him head out to the store in the morning to grab some missing ingredients. "That's fine," he mumbles, yawns.

"Any reason you called earlier? Or did you just miss me that much?" She says it with a hint of sarcasm, but Matt knows she wants it to be true, expects it to be.

"No, yeah. I mean. Both," he inelegantly replies. "Do you know when you'll be back?" He asks, stretches into another yawn.

She pauses for a second, lets out a short sigh. "I'm gonna take the train back up to Boston on the 27th, I think. Stay with Tay for a few

days. She's doing that New Year's thing. You're still invited, by the way— I mean, I know you weren't gonna go because of Ben and all, but if he's not there… maybe you could come? No pressure—"

"Okay, yeah, I'll think about it," he snaps, halfway-regrets it, still not too intent on hearing her ramble on about a party he definitely won't be attending. He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Sorry. Sorry, just… I'll let you know, okay? But. The 27th? You, uh… wanna come to my place and exchange gifts, maybe?"

"Yeah, yes. I'd really like that," she says, lilted and smiley. "I'll call you before I leave here."

"That's perfect. That sounds great," he mutters, feeling himself slipping into sleep again. "How're the lights?" He asks absentmindedly.

"Good! Finally fixed. Thank God. It took all fucking day, seriously. We had to ask one of our neighbors— well, five doors down, but still — with a competingly extravagant amount of decorations behind my dad's back—"

She talks for a while more. Matt's brain catches maybe 10% of it, fading in and out, hand's grip slowly losing control of the phone.

"Matt?" She asks eventually.

He shocks himself up, coughs, totally not suspicious. "That's great, babe."

"Okay, okay, sorry. I'll let you get your beauty sleep," she laughs, not offended. "Good night, Matt."

"Mhm. Night, Chelle," he murmurs, and searches for the phone's body with the handset aimlessly, eyes still closed, moving it around in slamming circles until he finally feels the divot.

Somehow, he is rudely awoken by the shrilling of the phone for a second time today.

Thankfully, however, Kyle shouts out, "I got it!" and Matt is freed from his responsibilities, turns onto his stomach and tucks his hands under the pillow.

He's very certain he's not gonna be able to fall back asleep. But he'll

take the three minutes of fading in and out of consciousness as some act of earthly kindness; a final moment to breathe before the day begins to steal time away.

After what feels like two seconds, he's awoken again, this time by Kyle pressing on his shoulder, urging him to wake up.

"What?" Matt murmurs, eyes still closed, content with watching the backs of his lids for now.

"Sorry. Just— I'll go to the store alone, alright?" Kyle says, voice soft and considerate, much too kind where he's usually obnoxious. "We need walnuts, butter, and toffee chips?"

With curiosity, Matt's eyes flicker open. One stays squinted shut, the bathing of light from the window much too stark for this moment, but the other examines Kyle's sincerity. "Why?"

Kyle shrugs. "I kinda just wanna get it over with, to be honest."

Matt squints his singular open eye in disbelief, suspicion, but he really can't say no to another twenty minutes under the covers. "'Kay. Get eggs, too," he mumbles, buries himself deeper into the covers, eyes closed again, snug. "Thanks."

"I'll be back soon," Kyle assures him, and promptly exits his room.

And Matt tries, alright, to close his eyes again and find a way to let himself sink into the bed comfortably, happily. He even covers his head with his pillow, buries himself away; he curls into himself and breathes slow and controlled, aiming to off-set the start of this day as long as humanly possible.

To no avail. He just ends up tacky with sweat from all his tossing and turning, and murderously annoyed with his lack of sleeping prowess.

"Fuck it," he mutters to himself quietly, sits up in bed and stretches out through a deep yawn. He grabs a sweatshirt from the floor and tosses his hair loosely before grabbing the book he's been neglecting from his bedside table.

The only real next step is padding downstairs; Matt stares at the descending steps, imagines tumbling like his marbles, getting lost in a nook and waiting it out, whatever *it* is. Anything can be comfortable given the proper thoughts.

("C'mon, I'm begging you," Ben pleaded, hopping up and down all giddy. "I will get on my knees and beg. Matty, come *on*."

Matt groaned and slid a dollar bill into the vending machine. "There's no more room in the car," he pointed out, mulled over his snack selection.

"There is. There will be. I'll make room," Ben insisted, watched Matt struggle with making up his mind, as usual, and grinned. "Olivia can ride on the roof for all I care."

Matt laughed, slightly too loud, and hovered his fingers above the engraved numbers of the vending machine, hesitating. "We can just go together later—"

"No, fuck that, you're gonna— you'll tell me you're all busy. You're gonna find a reason. Don't find a reason," he insisted, grabbed Matt's shoulder and snuck his fingers against his neck with a squeeze. "And we said we'd work on that screenplay, so we won't have any time to go later," Ben rationalized, still eyeing Matt's fingers half-pressing the 5, then letting go and moving slowly to the number 3.

Matt sighed, bit down on his lip and considered having to sit on the floor on the feet of multiple strangers just to spend a night in Mexico with his best friend. He turned his head to Ben, pretended not to notice Ben's fingers nearly cradling his neck, soft and pressing at once. "And you like these people?"

"I like these people," Ben emphasized, and took the initiative to press 32 on the machine, prompting a bag of sour cream and onion Lays. "Not more than I like you. Of course."

The smile that quirked at Matt's lips was not voluntary. "Of course," he restated, and he quickly turned his head to see the bag of chips fall into the machine's pit. "Fine."

"Really?" Ben quirked up, grabbed Matt's face with both hands and smiled brighter than Matt recalled ever seeing. Immediately, Matt nodded, confirming, laughing alongside him, turning red and blaming it on the Los Angeles sun. "God, I could kiss you! Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. It's gonna be fuckin' awesome."

"Okay, okay," Matt laughed and reached into the vending machine to grab his chips. "Happy?"

"Extremely," Ben smiled before kissing Matt's forehead and stealing a

chip in lightning succession.

The following day, Matt unfortunately spent three hours crammed on the floor of a beat-down ‘78 Toyota Corolla until they entered Tijuana. He managed to get a seat at Ben’s feet, at least.)

His mom is downstairs, moving through the kitchen all hurried, pouring the coffee from her mug into a thermos. She’s fully clad in her winter attire, scarf wrapped around her head, jacket puffy, fingers wrapped in gloves. The lack of dexterity causes her to spill some against the counter, black coffee staining the tile. “Ah, fuck,” she curses, shifting to tear off a piece of kitchen towel.

Matt chuckles and jumps in, dumps his book on the counter and catches her attention. “Go wherever you gotta go, ma. I’ll clean up,” he promises, beats her to the paper-towel-punch, and lays it flat on the darkened spot.

“Jesus, you scared me,” she laughs, delayed, unzipping the top part of her jacket and breathing out a sigh as she leans in to kiss Matt’s cheek. “You sure? Everything alright?” She quickly screws the thermos’s top back on, grabs the handle as she heads away from Matt, clearly not intent on staying to clean up either way.

“Yeah, yeah, fine. All good. Drive safe,” he confirms, wiping the stain, paper dragging weak streaks.

The keys jingle as she grabs them from the hook. “Love you! I’ll see you later tonight, okay? And put some socks on, it’s cold. The floors are cold.”

“Yeah, alright.”

“I mean it!” She raises her voice as she pulls down the front door’s handle.

“Socks. Got it!” Matt responds, decidedly not reaching for, or even thinking about, any socks, dumping the half-soaked paper towel in the trash. “Love you!” He manages to squeeze it in just before the door closes, reaching for a second sheet to remove the streaks.

With the house empty, Matt snatches his book back and makes his way towards the couch in the living room.

Immediately, his eyes catch on the Christmas tree in front of him, decorated with the cheap ornaments Kyle and him picked up, an

expectedly large pile of presents seated on top of the tree skirt catching pine. He smiles secretly, hides it from himself, letting the childish magic of Christmas remain even when his days are now framed by part-time jobs and analytical folklore essays.

He fingers at his bookmark, chews the meaty inside of his cheek. It's not easy being reminded: there are ornaments among the replacements that have his face — and Kyle's face — on them, all young and wet behind the ears. There's a shitty homemade one of him and Ben, tucked against the side, facing the window like they're staring out at Cambridge together.

("It looks ridiculous," Matt laughed, holding the repurposed house-shaped ornament with a small picture of him and Ben as teenagers messily superglued to the ceramic. "They have frame ornaments, man." He picked one off the tree as an example and handed it to Ben.

"Fuck that," Ben said with a grin, cocky. "This shit was made with love." He pointed at his own creation, dried superglue smears obvious surrounding the paper.

Matt looked back at him all sparkly, glanced from that cocksure kid in the photo to the cocksure dude sitting in front of him, and smiled against his will.

Ben grabbed it and placed it on one of the empty branches, took a step back as if he were examining the mise-en-scene of a single film frame. He swung an arm around Matt when he joined him in staring. "Fits right in, no?"

It took a second to regain his wits, but Matt nodded, leaned into Ben's touch because he could. "Really does.")

He blinks the sappy feeling he gets from Ben's gifts away, too overwhelmed by how soft the edges of the moment are, and he opens up his book.

It's a tricky one. *The Passion According to G.H.* He's been reading it, despite its short length, for the past two weeks. Sometimes there are sentences that take him hours to fully receive, always so deceptively simple. A woman in a room thinking. A woman in a room killing, thinking about killing, about life, enveloped in the metaphysical world, the expansion of it, the way things ought to be.

Sometimes text feels too close, like an exposure. Matt feels himself dripping as he mulls over a line— *A violence is all the more violent*

because it is neutral.

Maybe, bitterly, Matt wonders if this is payback.

("You're in LA?" Ben had asked over the phone, clearly shocked.

Matt squeezed his eyes shut in shame. "Yeah. Yes, I'm sorry, man. A friend of my mom's passed away and she didn't wanna go alone— I should've... Fuck, I would've told you and I wanted to see you—"

"Matty, it's fine," Ben laughed, easing him minimally. He sipped on something, a bedside beer, if Matt knew him at all, and spoke again. "You're good. I mean it."

Matt chewed on his molars. "Still," he continued. "I wish I... We could've grabbed a drink. Coffee, even," he mulled, all contemplative, watching his mom sitting at the gate prematurely.

"Would've been nice, man, but it's not— You didn't do anything wrong."

That was difficult to be convinced of. He scratched below his cheekbone. "You're coming down for Christmas?" He asked, tentatively.

Ben belched right into his ear. "I'm coming down for Christmas.")

He grits his teeth. A violently neutral declaration of rejection. Maybe it's not what Clarice Lispector had in mind, but it's presently occupying Matt's headspace like some unacceptable evilness, so forgive him for drawing parallels. He's got the sudden urge to call him up: *"What gives?"*

He's forgotten to take any steps towards being livid. It's always been impossible to be mad at Ben. And even now, Matt's not sure if this is something that warrants scrutiny, a reminder of that soft-spoken promise to be here for Christmas. Making the moves to figure something like that out is practically unfeasible; Ben isn't doing this to punish him, fine, he can acknowledge that, but Ben certainly isn't making it easy on him, either.

An apology would have been nice. A real one, not one made from weak excuses and twisty words. Matt scoffs out loud like he's in heated conversation. He deserves a goddamn apology, doesn't he? Some recognition! He's coping all on his own, in his stupid Christmas-y pajama pants, not-reading the book he wants to finish today, looking

at that dumb ornament and thinking about Ben too much (whatever Too Much means anyway).

Maybe calling Michelle would do him good. She'd listen. He knows he's able — allowed, maybe — to be open with her; she offers an ear even when Matt wants nothing more than to be silent forever. But this is good. It can be good. Useful, maybe, to vent about Ben to someone who isn't Ben.

The worry here is neediness. Maybe more than neediness. Matt's not sure how to shake this feeling that sharing his thoughts will lead him to be *found out* in some way. Like there's something that'll inevitably float its way to the surface and buoy, finally heavy and dense enough, intent to stay there forever.

He's not ready for that. He grits his teeth and wonders how fucking long it can possibly take to run to the grocery store.

Matt opens his book again and flicks through a few pages, not nearly as attentive as he should be, before he hears the front door finally slam open.

"I'm back!" Kyle shouts, needlessly, and lets the door drop, the stomping of his boots on the mat obvious. Just a second later, he's leaning in the living room's archway, pulling his gloves off. "Could you shovel the front?"

Matt drops his book to his chest and glares.

"Oh, fuck off," Kyle laughs, sniffling, his nose red. "You were supposed to do it yesterday. Wouldn't kill you to get off your ass."

He picks his book back up and finishes the page, stopping reluctantly at the top of the next, before setting it down on the coffee table. Kyle has already turned back, away from the archway, and Matt considers the validity of Schrödinger's Brother.

Begrudgingly, he sits up, lets his feet meet the carpet, and paces unsteadily towards the hallway.

He stops in the archway, deer-in-headlights, frozen still. He rubs his eyes twice, thrice, breath caught in his throat.

This has got to be some sort of trauma response. His body is covering for him, somehow. Or maybe he's actually lost it. He's probably lost it. Because two feet away from him, dressed in a fucking windbreaker in

sub-zero, fists balled into his pockets, a suitcase and a carry-on by his side, rocking back and forth on his heels, is goddamn *Ben.*

“What?” Matt just says, stares between Kyle’s smug smile indicating this is in fact not a hallucination and Ben’s expecting eyebrows.

Ben laughs, and it’s a good sound, it really is, all full and low. “Hello to you, too.”

“What is this? How?” Matt asks, chest buzzing with excitement he’s half-knowingly attempting to suppress.

“Well, first I got on a plane—” Miracle by itself, Matt thinks, “and that plane flew me all the way here—”

“Fuck off,” Matt lets out a cackle in disbelief. “What about your fuckin’ solid roots or whatever?”

Ben smiled, shrugged. “It’s Christmas, man.”

And the buzzing became a magnet, pulling him right to Ben, to his stupidly underdressed frame, face shoved into the shoulder of his windbreaker and arms wrapped tightly around his waist like it’s been years, like he’s been at war. “You’re an asshole,” Matt mumbles, muffled, but he just hugs him tighter.

“For wanting to surprise my best friend?” His arms wrap tight around Matt, too, squeezing close in a manner that’s probably, definitely, too intimate.

But fuck it, Matt thinks, unashamed for once, holds it for longer than he thinks he should because he’s not letting himself hug Ben like this ever again. And they deserve this, a thousand more of these, but he’ll settle for right now. “For lying to me,” he clarifies.

Ben laughs against the side of Matt’s head. “I heard you’ve been all mopey this week.”

“Whatever,” Matt scoffs, doesn’t deny, and slowly pulls out of the embrace like it physically hurts to do so. “You didn’t bring a coat?” He fingers the windbreaker Ben is wearing and chuckles, finally looking at him in non-disbelief.

“Forgot how fuckin’ cold this place is,” Ben says back, teeth exaggeratedly clattering.

His smile is wide, unmoving. It's been months since Matt has seen him and he can't help but think that it shows; he's tanner, taller, slimmer than Matt remembers.

And then, remembering his frustration, Matt punches Ben's arm suddenly with a huff.

"*Ow!* Fuck was that?" Ben yelps, rubbing at his injured arm.

"Felt right," Matt shrugs, grinning, unable to lay the truth out in a way that didn't eye as pathetic.

But Ben's smile turns wicked just the same, and Matt's legs think before he can, running upstairs in a hurry while cackling, Ben following in tow, hollering *I'll get you, Damon!* like they're ten years old again.

It always falls into place easily with Ben. The moments of discontent, of unease, that come with seeing someone you haven't for a while are practically nonexistent. The only lingering disdain is Matt's resentment towards being lied to.

Noncommittally, Matt wonders about the coddling he's received in response to Ben's supposed inability to come to Boston. He assumes they were all in on it; Kyle picked Ben up at the airport, but he also promised to help make Christmas Eve cookies as if Matt were some depressed little puppy with separation anxiety getting dropped off at his relatives. He can go without Ben. He didn't need calm reassuring words underscored with a perception of some kind of unnatural love for the guy.

But thinking too deeply about any of this is a little impossible when Ben has his arm pinned behind his back, and he's slamming on the hallway's hardwood for mercy, tapping out, begging to be unhanded — it's just too good. It's okay to miss this.

Matt rises back to his feet and coughs through his heavy breathing, shoving Ben one more time for good measure. "You hungry?" He asks, and Ben's smug smile lifts into a fondness that has Matt going a little goopy.

"Starving," Ben confirms, wrapping an arm around Matt's shoulder. "Need a coffee, too," he yawns, and dives into the pocket of his windbreaker for his cigarettes.

They walk downstairs together, an awkward half side-by-side, half

one-behind-the-other on account of the narrow stairway, as Ben takes a quick drag.

“Dunkin’?” Matt suggests as they get to the front door, passing Ben a warmer coat, one Ben left here years ago that’s undoubtedly a little small for him now, before cladding himself in his own coat.

It’s not really a question. Ben just makes a vague affirmative sound and switches jackets, cigarette hanging from in between his lips, the smoke rising past his nose. He looks older somehow, Matt thinks contemptuously, more seasoned, lived-in.

And he can’t help it, — hates it, needs it removed immediately and violently. It's too intimate, too cerebral for no reason — he can’t believe he’s missing out on seeing that process happen. One day, he’ll wake up and Ben will be fifty. With his palm squeezed on top of the door handle, Matt hopes to God he’ll be close enough to see it happen.

Chapter End Notes

so sorry it's been forever. I've been unwell but starting to improve so hope to get back to it! :)

Chapter 5: 5. Christmas Eve

Chapter Summary

> “You know, you turn into a real goddamn bitch—” he shoves his hand in an oven mitt and opens the oven door, ushering Matt aside with the first tray in his hand, “whenever we do this.”
>
> Matt’s not accepting any of this slander. “And you move like a fuckin’ tortoise, so excuse me for running a tight ship,” he scoffs, leans back to get a look at the second tray of gingersnaps Ben is pulling out and cheers to himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Get the fuckin’ gingersnaps out!” Matt repeats himself, the oven working overtime with its even shrilling, as he mixes Heath pieces into his batter.

Ben frantically moves from cutting the baker’s chocolate, sucking on his fingers to get the dark residue off, wiping any excess on his apron. “You know, you turn into a real goddamn bitch—” he shoves his hand in an oven mitt and opens the oven door, ushering Matt aside with the first tray in his hand, “whenever we do this.”

Matt’s not accepting any of this slander. “And you move like a fuckin’ tortoise, so excuse me for running a tight ship,” he scoffs, leans back to get a look at the second tray of gingersnaps Ben is pulling out and cheers to himself. “You finish chopping the walnuts?” He wipes a row of sweat from his brow, because baking is an Olympic sport, contrary to popular belief, and begins scooping out the toffee chip batter.

Ben tugs off his oven mitt and spins around to procure a little glass bowl filled with chopped walnuts.

The bits are a little big, but Matt has no time to discuss this right now.

“Snaps look good,” Ben smiles, patting Matt’s back, making it all hot and exposed.

Right now, however, Matt can’t allow himself to process Ben’s tan hand rounding up to squeeze his neck like he needs him to relax, nor that stupid half smile he’s sporting, so he just nods tightly. “Can you

dip these in the walnuts?" He asks, choked for some reason, pointing at the cookie scoops he's creating on the parchment paper.

Ben squeezes close next to him and dips each ball into the walnuts as Matt scoops, humming to something Matt can't make out, fingers sticky with batter. "Are we almost done?" He asks, eyeing the nearly empty walnut bowl, and Matt's batter running out.

"We go through this every year," Matt laughs, amazed at Ben's ability to make this seem so much more complicated and effortful than it is. "We're barely halfway through, man. And we're out of trays. We'll be here a while."

Ben groans, leans into Matt's side and dramatically drapes himself across his shoulder. "What's left?" He asks, steals a walnut chunk from the bowl, still wrapped around Matt like a ragdoll, like he's not one-hundred and eighty-five pounds of tall, dense human.

Scooping the last ball of the walnut-toffee batch, Matt checks the note positioned next to his mixing bowl, suddenly running warm. "We've gotta make the sugar cookies, the chocolate chip ones, and we gotta bake off those molasses ones you like, that dough we made before breakfast," he reminds Ben, and himself, taking the initiative to finish the last one's walnut coating.

"Ooh, can we do those next?" Ben asks, finally perking up, and he begins licking the batter off of his pointer with dumb begging eyes.

Matt's eyes cast themselves to Ben's mouth immediately, almost on instinct, watching him purse his lips and move on to his middle finger, his thumb. "Uh—" He swallows something dryer than saliva, tears his gaze away and decidedly puts aside his quickening heart rate. "Yeah. Yeah, I think that would be— That'd be okay."

It's nothing. Matt is overwhelmed by the heat in this goddamn kitchen, the overdrive of attempting to keep a tight ship, the closeness and sweat and smell (is that new cologne? He should ask) of Ben's towering body. It's nothing. He's uncomfortable. He's often uncomfortable. Dazed. He casts his eyes back to Ben, who is now distractedly biting at the pad of his thumb while eyeing the toffee-walnut cookies.

It's nothing. He missed him. He always misses Ben. Growing up alongside someone will do that to you. Christmas amplifies it all a bit too much, makes it too forward and partially unsightly, and he's never had to miss him like that before. It's just—

“You okay?” Ben asks, eyebrows knitted, head cocked slightly in concern.

It’s nothing. Jesus, he should really see about the weather. Maybe it’s one of those unnaturally warm days. It must be. “Yeah, yes. I’m— Just warm. Are you— it’s fuckin’ hot in here—”

Ben’s hand wraps around his forehead immediately. Matt holds his breath and isn’t quite sure why. Shit, maybe he has the flu. Maybe he’s spreading flu particles all over the cookies, all over Ben, all over the house with no regard for other people.

“Just go lie down for a sec,” Ben suggests, turning his hand around, still pressing. “I can bake off the molasses ones.”

(“Jesus, you look like shit,” Ben muttered, bowl in hand, as he sat down at the edge of Matt’s bed.

It was day four of the flu. Matt felt like a spear had run its way into, but not through, his skull. He eyed Ben with reasonable contempt and turned his back to him with a pained groan.

“Sorry, sorry,” Ben apologized softly, and gripped Matt’s shoulder to turn him back.

There had been no point in putting up a fight. He let his body flop back around, lying on his back, sniffling, his eyes closed tightly. “I think I’m dying.”

Ben chuckled, felt Matt’s forehead with the back of his palm, dragged his hand down to his cheeks, his neck, felt how warm he was everywhere. “It’s close, but the nurses and I think you’re gonna pull through.” He ran a hand through Matt’s unwashed, sweat-clad hair and didn’t flinch. “Sit up. You gotta have dinner.”

“No,” Matt whined, opening his eyes, stomach filled with dread and acid and all the terrible things that make you feel like you’re being eaten alive from the inside out. Ben looked all soft and kind, concerned in a way Matt had never seen him. He thought something terrible and pushed it away quickly.

[*Maybe I wouldn’t mind being sick all the time if it meant he’d keep looking at me like that.*]

“Don’t be a baby,” Ben pressed, bowl still in hand. “It’s just broth. Lukewarm. Your mom made it.” He put the broth down on the

bedside table momentarily and hoisted Matt up to sit against the headboard against his will.

“Ben, I can’t,” Matt pleaded, nauseous, exhausted, wanting so badly to roll around and try to sleep like he had been doing in the hours previous. He drew the sheets up to cover his bare chest, choked back a pathetic sob. But it fell on deaf ears as Ben handed him the bowl, the spoon, and sat beside him with a deeply conflicting stern calmness.

Ben visibly hesitated before he spoke, biting the inside of his cheek, eyes cast away from meeting Matt’s gaze. “You need me to feed you, then?”

Matt chewed on his molars and flickered from the hell-soup in his hands to Ben’s concerned face. He’d felt so tempted to reach out and feel Ben’s forehead, too, to drag his hand down to his neck and squeeze his nape, get nice and close and needy in a way he couldn’t avoid pondering when his systems got all fried from illness. But he shook his head, passed the bowl back. “Can you put it—” he sniffled, all gross, wiping his running nose with the back of his forearm, “in a glass?” He pointed at one of the empty glasses by his bedside table, previously filled with salt water his mother kept leaving to try and keep him alive, shaky.

Ben nodded, smiled hastily as if he didn’t want to be found out. “‘Course, Matty.”)

“Fuck no,” Matt immediately says, shocking back into his body, carefully swatting Ben’s hand away. “I don’t trust you with that shit.”

“It’s just rolling ‘em in sugar and tossing ‘em in the oven,” Ben points out, scoffing as he laughs. “No faith in your sous-chef.”

“You’re a prep cook at best,” he bites back, obviously grateful for Ben’s help, making his way out of the trance his body was in. He turns the oven down to 350 and drops their next two trays inside, ignoring Ben’s whining about his lack of oven-mitt-usage and setting a thirteen minute timer.

There’s a lot of waiting involved in baking. A lot of waiting and timing and checking and measuring. That’s a collection of things neither Matt nor Ben are very skilled at. Last year, they burned two trays of pine tree-shaped sugar cookies because they both got inexplicably sucked into a Golden Girls rerun following the procurement of flour; the year previous, Matt figured they didn’t need to chill the molasses cookies and they ended up with a sheet of crunched-up sugary batter instead

of a worthy dessert; the first year Ben came over for Christmas Eve, they mixed up tablespoons and teaspoons and received domed, salty batches of both thumbprint cookies and toffee-walnut cookies before realizing what they'd fucked up.

This year was going to be different. Matt took his Ritalin, wrote up checklists, and laminated every recipe to the counter so they wouldn't move or get covered in grease while they worked. And like Ben said — the gingersnaps look fucking *great.* The raspberry thumbprint ones they made earlier are delicious, too, fully chilled and set aside.

Ben perches himself on the kitchen counter, which is still dusted in flour and chocolate and brown butter — because Matt is making an effort to stay organized this year but he's not *God,* alright? — and tosses the walnut-toffee bowl in the sink beside him, lazily dusting his hands off on his apron. "So," he says, like Matt should be expecting something, "how's Michelle?"

They didn't get a lot of time to talk last night, tasked with shoveling the walkway and then called over to the neighbor's front yard for more snow-plowing when she saw them working. They fell asleep exhausted and achy, sentences scarcely shared. So now, questions that should be night-questions are seeping into the day. Matt grabs a glass and fills it with water, taking a big sip before he speaks in fear of saying the wrong thing.

Things are good with Michelle. He knows they are. But he can't help but think this is as good as it gets, and that's not exactly what he's searching for. Some girl out there must be able to make him feel as himself as Ben does. He blinks the thought away, lets it float in the ether instead of taking space in his exhausted brain.

"Good, she's good," Matt nods, scrunching his face in at his own impersonal declaration. "I mean, we're great, y'know?"

Ben nods, a sympathetic smile flashing across his face. "You, uh, you love her?" It's an inexplicable question. Needless. Ben is picking at the skin around his fingernails as he asks it, fidgeting, looking down.

Matt takes this moment to also avoid eye contact, reaching for two bowls and beginning to mechanically sift pre-measured flour into one of them according to the recipe's instructions. The heat is creeping back up his neck. Goddamn toffee-walnuts. He should check what the thermostat is showing, if it can corroborate his burning. His shoulders shrug up before he can even think to say anything. "Too soon to tell."

“It’s been half a year, man,” Ben chuckles, lightens the mood ever so slightly with his tease, knocking his foot against Matt’s hip. “You can wait for it. That’s fine, dude. Of course. Just— I mean, you see a future with her?”

Matt’s body shrugs again, mixing in baking soda and baking powder. “I have no idea,” he admits, chuckling in contempt. “The thing is that I can’t think of a reason why I— Why we wouldn’t have a future together. She’s fuckin’ smart and beautiful and funny and easy to talk to. She’s— I mean, Ben, she’s as close as you can get to perfect.” Ben scrunches his face in and quirks an eyebrow up in disbelief, shifting his eyes around like he’s looking for an imaginary audience to listen along to what he’s hearing. “I’m fuckin’ serious, don’t make that dumb face at me,” Matt cackles, smacks Ben’s foot away from himself. “But I don’t… I just don’t see it. I don’t know why.”

Ben softens at that, legs kicking slightly, watching Matt at work with the wet ingredients now. “That’s okay,” he assures. “You’ve never been good at that.”

“At what?” Matt frowns, plugging in the electric hand mixer again.

“Thinking so far ahead,” Ben contends calmly, as if it’s not a direct insult, hopping off of the counter. “Why’re you making the sugar cookies when we said we’d do the molasses first?”

“These have to freeze for fifteen,” Matt says mindlessly, stunned. “Fuck you mean I can’t think ahead?”

Ben hesitates, shrugs. “Just. I dunno. You’ve always been sure of, like, acting. But that’s about it. You’re indecisive.”

Matt bites the inside of his cheek and turns the electric mixer on to give himself time to think.

He’s not *that* indecisive. Fine, maybe Ben had to pick their breakfast, and maybe he’s got a bit of a tough time deciding between green and yellow as his favorite color, but he can look ahead. He’s gonna be an actor, and he’s gonna leave this place and get to New York eventually, he has to. The rest will catch up to him. He doesn’t need to be placing big bets on how his life will turn out; it just will. He’s not— He can look ahead if asked. He’s got dreams, which definitely count as looking ahead. He’s gonna be an actor in New York. Maybe Los Angeles. That’s pretty fuckin’ good.

Michelle. He doesn’t know if he sees Michelle there with him. Not

because he's indecisive, but because he's sweaty from the oven's heat again and Ben is practically breathing down his goddamn neck and his autonomic nervous system may be under attack at the moment and none of that is fair. Not when he's doing all this work and Ben has him psychoanalyzing himself like he's on Freud's goddamn chaise longue. The butter and sugar spiral at his hands. He takes a shaky breath in.

He doesn't want to be wrong. This isn't the kind of thing you're able to be wrong about without life-changing repercussions. If he loves Michelle — God, whatever *that* means — he's gotta do something about it. Thinking about it will never be enough either way. He takes another breath in, decides to ignore the fact that Ben is just roaming around the kitchen like nothing has changed.

Once the butter and sugar are a pale yellow, Matt stops the electric mixer.

"I'm not leading her on, if that's what you're implying," is what drops out of Matt's mouth.

Ben, choking on a sip of water, shakes his head and coughs unattractively. "Jesus, Matt, no," he chokes out, taking another sip to force it down. "That's not what I meant. At all."

Matt's heart feels heavy. He knows that's not what Ben meant, but it felt like an accusation all the same. Why *would* he be with someone he sees no future with?

("You think we'll still be friends?" Ben asked, tipping a beer back as they watched *The Big Chill* on the shitty little TV in the dorm's common room, nodding towards the 30-something year-old former friends in the film. They weren't supposed to be there, it being three in the morning and all, but Matt wrote two essays for one of the RAs last semester, so he had some pull.

Matt laughed at the question, at that being what came up for Ben while watching this. "I don't see why not," he confirmed, smiled wide, and leaned his head against Ben's shoulder in that way that was acceptable during mushy moments.

Ben stacked his head on top of Matt's. "Yeah," he whispered, thumb playing with the tab of his beer can like a compulsion.)

He grabs an egg and holds it out to Ben. "You wanna crack it?"

As if it's some trick, Ben makes his agonizingly slow way over to Matt

and the egg, eyes narrowed, trying to find him out. “You’re not pissed, right?” He confirms slowly, grabbing the egg and standing right next to Matt.

Matt wipes the sweat off his brow and shakes his head. “It’s surprisingly difficult to be pissed at you,” he admits with a slightly wounded smile, watching the egg spread out in the bowl, yolk breaking on impact. “Just tense. It’s fine.”

“I really didn’t mean anything by it,” Ben reiterates, leans against the counter to watch Matt whisk in the egg, and attempts to catch his eye.

Matt bites the inside of his cheek and finds it in himself to look over at Ben, at his needy eyes brimming with sincerity, corner of his mouth quirking up when he notices Matt looking back at him. “I know,” he assures him, leans their elbows together as some way to indicate closeness. “How much left on the walnut-toffee?”

Ben eyes the timer. “Two minutes.”

“Get the molasses dough out,” Matt orders, slowly incorporating the dry into his wet ingredients. “You’ll finally get to meet her,” he says suddenly, folding flour, acknowledging his long-standing desire for Ben’s approval. “She’s coming over on the 27th.”

Ben tosses the molasses dough onto the counter and quickly moves back to the oven. “I’ll be there,” he notes while sliding on his oven mitts, watching the timer drop to one minute. “Hey, we doing gifts tonight?”

Ben will be going home tomorrow morning to spend Christmas with his own family, logically, though Matt selfishly wishes he would stay here forever instead. The holidays are much easier to get through, much more exciting to participate in, when Ben is here lighting the place up.

Matt nods. “Yeah, yes. When everybody’s sleeping. We’re in the basement again,” he reminds him. “Shit, I gotta get your gift down there,” he mumbles, mostly to himself, wrapping the finished dough into some plastic wrap.

“I can drop both of ours down there,” Ben says, shrugging, already tugging his oven mitts back off. “Since I’m not to be trusted with the art of baking.”

Matt scoffs out a chuckle and doesn’t hesitate, nodding. “Mine’s on my

desk. You'll see it. No peeking."

Ben crosses his heart, and, just for good measure, also salutes. His footsteps ascend loudly just as the oven's timer beeps.

"How the fuck are you doing that?" Ben whines, frustrated, squeezing white icing out of his piping bag onto one of the simple circular sugar cookies, paying much more attention to whatever Matt is up to than his own shortcomings.

Matt stares down at his creation proudly. It's not exactly the most majestic thing he's ever seen, certainly not worthy of Ben's annoyed praise, but it's nice. A little snowman with a red scarf and all the expected accouterments. He looks over at Ben's pile, a messy mix of white, red, black, and green icing piled on a handful of cookies. One of the snowmen has a bright red blob in the center of its body as if it's been shot and is losing a critical amount of blood, something they should maybe lean into for the comedy, and Ben attempted a wreath but ended up with something that looks akin to green pubes. It's doing great things for Matt's confidence.

"You're squeezing it too hard," Matt laughs, watching the icing pour out impatiently as a result of Ben's death grip. "Go slow."

"We're gonna be here another three hours if I go any slower," Ben mumbles, nodding over at the dozen unfinished cookies, taking Matt's advice nonetheless.

They're getting to that point in the cookie-making process when *anything* seems better than doing this for one more second. Matt makes a mental note to start decorating the sugar cookies early on next year, because morale really dips after five continuous hours.

"I can finish up," Matt suggests, mostly out of guilt. Watching Ben struggle continuously is usually entertaining, but he feels genuinely bad for the guy right now. After not receiving an answer for a few seconds, he hesitates, backtracks. "If you want. It's— I know I've been an ass all day with the planning and—"

"Chill out," Ben laughs, puts down his piping bag and forms himself behind Matt, dropping his hands on his shoulders gently. "I'll just do the dishes, then," he says, softly still, breath coated in molasses and drawn close to Matt's ear. "You're good, it went well. We finally didn't fuck up this time."

Matt, after finally getting a handle on his body temperature, is finding himself running hot again, spilling green frosting onto his thumb as he leans into Ben's hands carefully kneading at his shoulders. Maybe this is his new normal. Burning up incrementally. Male early-onset menopause. That must exist.

It did go well. Nothing burned. Everything tastes fucking awesome, maybe the best it ever has, and the floors, walls, and counters didn't suffer too grave a fate. He can relax now. He can hold steady and remember nice things, like drinking eggnog and winning Monopoly and unpacking his stocking. Ben is here, and his mom and brother are in the living room quietly arguing about last-minute decorations, and he's at home and calm and definitely not suffering from heart palpitations of an unknown origin. Ben is here and he's still rubbing Matt's shoulders, all close and loose, and Matt is finding it difficult not to relate his burning-alive feeling to his proximity to Ben, but there is no time for that.

So he swallows whatever needs swallowing and nods. "Sounds good." His voice cracks and he seems to himself to be twelve again, pumped up on something unknown.

"Relax, man," Ben whispers, and his voice is inside of Matt's ear, inside of his brain, between his temples, settled there. He massages down, soft, rubs against Matt's neck, thumbs pushed into his delts.

Matt snorts, the notion of simply relaxing seeming farcical, but he closes his eyes and leans back, embraces the heat, the palpitations, lets go of his piping bag for a second. The body responds poorly to stress. All he needs is a few moments to relax, to allow himself to melt from the heat before coming back to the sub-zero reality of Cambridge in December. "I'm fuckin' tired," he admits, getting it out shakily. His insides are all light and fluttery while being weighed down by a million tons at once. He glances at the clock. His family will be arriving in about two hours, Chris and Casey a couple hours after. This leaves him very little wiggle room.

"We can leave the rest of 'em blank," Ben points out, hands moving in controlled up-down paths as if he's been practicing shoulder rubs in his free time. "Nobody's actually gonna give a fuck. I'm sure they'll be distracted enough by my moribund snowman to forgive us," he chuckles.

Matt feels a little dizzy, something he can easily attribute to standing on his feet too long, and smiles at the thought of Ben's gunshot victim

snowman. “You think so?” He asks to make sure, to get confirmation. A goddamn nap would do him good. Would do them both good, really.

Ben hums in affirmation. “Yeah, Matty,” he assures him, quiet. “You go rest up, dude. I’ll clean the kitchen.”

“Why’re being so—” He can’t come up with the right word for it. *Nice* feels too reductive and *attentive* is almost certainly insulting, given the insinuation of its previous lack.

“Being so what?” Ben asks innocently, but he knows exactly what Matt means — he’s being goddamn *sweet.* He probably got Matt a shitty last-minute gift and this is his way of compensating. He’s been minimally obnoxious, quietly contemplative, and a great conversationalist all day. And now he’s giving an *unprompted* shoulder massage.

Matt opens his eyes like he’s been pulled from a dream, stares down at the piping bag next to one of at least ten unfrosted cookies. “Nevermind,” he just mutters, shrugs Ben’s hands off, and shovels a bite of his unfinished cookie into his mouth. “I’m gonna take a nap. Shout if you need me?”

He turns around and is nearly chest-to-chest with Ben, backed against a counter.

The look that flickers past Ben’s widened eyes is mystifying, vague, but he nods curtly anyway as he adjusts himself and backs away to let Matt move freely.

(Matt looked at him, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “You—”

“I know,” Ben hurried out, avoiding eye contact to stay on track, truthful. “I know, it was a shitty thing to do, I know. And that’s why I’m telling you—”

“You’re telling me because I brought it up—”

“—Yes, okay, that’s kind of true, too, but I was gonna tell you! Seriously, I was, and I just— I had no idea if you would give a shit, even, so I didn’t know if I should— Because I didn’t want you to laugh at me for thinking you’d care when you didn’t, that seemed even worse than telling you and you getting fuckin’ pissed at me, but now you look *really* fuckin’ pissed and I think I should’ve just—”

“Dude,” Matt said, interrupting, stern, pressing a hand onto Ben’s shoulder.

Ben couldn’t look up, just stayed focused on picking at the skin around his thumb.

“I’m not fuckin’ pissed,” he assured him, squeezed, and attempted to paint an assuring face.

“You don’t just have to say that—”

“I’m not,” Matt interrupted again, not ready for a whole ‘nother spiel. “Ben, look at me, hey—” Ben met his eye, finally, pupils cloudy and darkened, “I’m not fuckin’ pissed. Seriously.”

Ben blinked a few times as if it would change what he had heard. “Then why—”

“Why would I give a shit about you hooking up with her, man? We dated for three weeks two years ago,” Matt attempted not to sound mocking as he let out a short laugh, lifting Ben’s chin up when he began looking back down all defeatist. “Next time, just tell me. You’re fuckin’ scary when you’re all compensatory.”

“What, you didn’t like the pancakes?” Ben asked, small, cheeks tinting red. He looked so innocent, then; just a kid with a need to please, to satisfy his perceived shortcoming.

“Bringing them to me in bed was overkill,” Matt laughed. “I love you, man. I think you’d have to, like, kill my grandmother for me to actually get pissed at you.”

Ben laughed, too, and out of relief, let some tears spring from his eyes. “Fine, okay,” he conceded, went in for a hug and buried himself into Matt’s shoulder. “Love you, too.”)

Surprisingly, Matt falls asleep on the basement’s couch with very little contemplation, wrapped in no blankets to attempt to combat his early-onset male menopause, and dreams of something so banal that it doesn’t even come back to him when he wakes up an hour later.

Ben is sitting on the floor in front of the opposite end of the couch, watching TV on silent, wrapped in a thin blanket and drinking what Matt can only assume to be wine in a mug.

Noticeably, Matt feels the weight of a blanket on himself, as well. His

eyes drift open and closed a couple of times before he shrugs the blanket off and rubs his face into the decorative pillow below him. “What time is it?” he asks, slightly slurry, muffled.

“We’ve got half an hour,” Ben responds after a couple of seconds, hoisting himself up onto the couch and shoving Matt’s feet out of the way. “Supposedly.”

They’ve got too much to do for half an hour to be all; Matt has to clean his room, get dressed, blow up an air mattress in the basement, and another in Kyle’s room, and he’s gotta help set the table—

“Jesus, you just woke up, man, take a second,” Ben scolds him, then squeezes Matt’s foot with a deceptively amused chuckle as if he can read his mind.

Matt has often wondered if he could. He used to test him, unbeknownst to Ben. *If you can read my mind, look at me and blink twice.* It couldn’t be too obvious, of course, or otherwise Ben would be giving away his secret power, and the entity that gave him that power wouldn’t be too happy about it.

But he’s the same in some ways, when he’s not preoccupied with planning and baking and overwhelming feelings of coming home despite having been home for several days; he can read Ben’s mind more readily than he can read his own most days. All it takes is a glance, a squeeze, a word. They don’t talk about this. Maybe they’re both concealing some unknown power, privy to each other’s unbearable sentiments when necessary, somehow orchestrated by something larger than themselves.

Ben turns the TV off and tugs Matt’s blanket all the way down. “I’ll do the mattress down here. Kyle and I fixed up your room a little, but go double-check,” he raises his eyebrows to check for understanding and seems satisfied by Matt’s timid nod, “Alright. I’ll meet you up there and we can dump the rest of our shit here. Just chill out,” Ben says, so simple, and passes Matt his mug, surprisingly not filled with wine.

He sniffs, can’t decipher it at all. “The fuck is this?”

“Ginger tea and rum,” he winks, getting up. “You can finish it. Loosen up! It’s fuckin’ Christmas!” Ben hops up and down, loosens his limbs literally by shaking them like a tall, thin tree caught in a windstorm, ushering off to the storage closet behind them.

“Christmas Eve,” Matt mutters in correction, but he smiles and takes a

sip from the abominable tea-concoction.

“Oh, fuck off,” Ben hollers back, the air mattress’s dragging marks already stark against the stone tile in the closet.

But Matt does what he’s told, good with direction if explicit enough, and trails up two flights of stairs until he’s back in his room.

They did a decent job cleaning, and Matt is pressed enough for time to not feel too personally violated by the fact that his clothes and notes and books were touched and moved by his brother and his best friend. Ben knows all his secret little staches; he’s sure the guy cleaned it up nice enough for his aunt and uncle not to find.

There’s a knock on the wall just as he moves over to the closet, and he turns around slowly to be met with Kyle already dressed in his nice clothes, which is rude and not helping the idea that thirty minutes both feels like ten seconds and ten hours, leaving Matt in a strange in-between world that is forcing him to get everything done in record speed. “Hi,” he says, quickly, slightly clipped, as he pushes aside Ben’s clothes and picks out the red and black striped button-up he picked out for the day.

Kyle steps into the room. “You’re welcome.”

“Shit, yeah,” Matt murmurs, tossing his t-shirt over his head and thankfully finding his deodorant still positioned where he left it on his closet floor. “Thank you, really. You need help with the air mattress?”

“All good,” he responds, moving like he’s got something to say.

Matt sprays his underarms and furrows his eyebrows. “Anything else?” He asks as he’s tossing his button-up on.

Kyle shrugs, but he’s grinning expectedly, like he’s got some coy little secret. He picks up an old snowglobe and decidedly doesn’t shake it, stares at the Christmas market scene inside instead. “How’s Ben?” He asks suddenly, facing away from Matt.

Matt frowns. “He’s… He’s good. He’s fine,” he decides for him, grabbing a pair of black slacks to outperform Kyle’s khakis. “You— Didn’t you just talk to him?” He questions, tugging his sweatpants down.

“Yeah, I just— I meant more, like… How are *you guys?*”

“I seriously don’t know what you want me to say here,” Matt rushes out, tugging on his slacks, folding his sweatpants and shoving them into a backpack to take downstairs. “Good. It’s good to have him here. Thank you for picking him up at the airport. Fuck you for keeping his little secret. He still sucks at decorating the sugar cookies. Did I cover it?”

He grabs a sweatshirt and a presumably clean t-shirt and folds those alongside the sweats before padding to his dresser and scouring for a pair of matching socks.

Kyle chuckles, and Matt, for a second, thinks he might hit him. “Yeah. Yup. I will see you downstairs, man.”

Matt rolls his eyes as Kyle walks away and steps in front of the mirror, roughing up his hair and feeling the tea-rum flow through him, making his stomach vaguely burn up.

If there were one thing Matt would change about his family’s holiday celebrations it’s the need for formality. Everybody is familiar enough with each other, and the whole finest tableware, finest slacks, finest behavior always appeared to him to be some way to silence that familiarity. The choked-out welcomes and loose embraces don’t give way to any form of relationship, it just forces closeness despite nobody’s sincere effort. The Christmas dinner that follows is, in itself, just a roadblock. They really all wanna play board games, talk shit, open gifts, and get piss-drunk. This is not a secret, but everybody acts like it is, which Matt supposes holds it all together — this mutually agreed upon silent contract. Nobody comes for the meal on the table or the clothes on the bodies.

Once he’s got a family of his own, he’ll do it differently. No slacks or button-ups allowed. Come in your pajamas and be prepared to eat junk.

Regardless of all that thought, all the desire he has to not care, he stares at his reflection in the mirror and fumbles with the top two buttons of his shirt. Open or closed, he can’t decide, so he settles for a second on only keeping the top button open.

The high-pitched clarity of a wolf whistle, however, breaks him out of solidifying this decision. His head snaps to the doorframe where Ben is propped, arms crossed with a sort of lopsided smile on his lips. “Open the other one,” he encourages, steps closer until Matt can see him looming behind his own reflection like a ghost.

“Where did you even come from?” Matt just mumbles, because his cheeks are turning red, presumably from the tea-rum, and obliges easily, opening the second button. It’s really a very minimal change.

Ben is stupidly tall now, has been for a while, and Matt detests every single time he’s made aware of this fact. Like now: Ben grabs Matt’s shoulders and turns him to face himself, and Matt has to lift his head just-so to entertain eye contact.

“I told you I’d be right up.” Ben just smiles, his eyes already a little glossy, as his hands reach over to Matt’s buttons subtly and undo a third. He steps back like he’s observing his work, his very minimal work, and nods in satisfaction.

It’s alarming how exposed it makes Matt feel, being looked at. The flush spreads down to his neck. “That all?” He asks, sheepish, unwillingly holding Ben’s gaze to prove, convince, that this is not intimidating him.

Ben tuts, thinks, and then moves to rustle Matt’s hair just a little. “Yeah. That’s all,” he confirms before stepping to the side and leaving Matt all cold, pacing over to the closet himself.

Matt scurries off, makes quick work of brushing his teeth again for good measure, before pocketing his toothbrush to drop into his backpack. Last year, he had to go four hours after waking up without brushing his teeth because everybody upstairs was hogging the bathroom in turns. It was murderous.

When he comes back to his room, Ben is standing in front of the mirror fixing his hair, and Matt pushes past him without looking. He jams his toothbrush into the same pocket as his clothing and notices Ben has plopped his own clothing on top in the same backpack. Maybe it would be logical to be annoyed, but it just makes Matt smile weakly as he zips it up.

“We’re good?” Ben asks, turned to face Matt with both thumbs up, torso clad in a dark red button-up shirt, eyebrows raised in questioning.

Matt scans him inadvertently. He’s always been good-looking in some form; that’s just a fact, an objective one, as far as Matt is concerned. With just a few extra years, however, Ben has grown into someone unmistakably handsome. It’s as if he was waiting to grow into his body, to become fully acquainted with it, before reaching a fuller potential. It kind of knocks the wind out of him, really, seeing him all

dorky and all sultry at once, but he nods, figures he should finally respond and quit his borderline gawking before things get weird and misconstrued. “Let’s— Yeah. All good.”

Matt’s family starts pouring in not too long after: his aunt and uncle, a few cousins, another aunt, his grandparents, a couple more cousins. Ben and him are both running around helping his mom with dinner, setting the table, getting the tablecloth to aid in the illusion that the two fold-outs they’ve added onto the ends of either side of the table are actually part of the same structure.

Eventually, Chris and Casey wander in with an objectively insane amount of gifts, and it becomes immediately clear to Matt that Ben didn’t even bother to stop by his own house before coming to his.

He picks up on bits: “Couldn’t even be bothered to…” Chris says, but she’s smiling, embraces him heartily.

“Other priorities,” Ben mumbles back, baring his teeth to Casey while he hugs his mom, kicks his shin. “Hope you like… Took hours,” is all Matt can hear after.

“Matt!” Chris cheers happily, pulling him into a hug that he ardently returns despite having seen her last month. “How’ve you been? You’re good? Harvard’s good?” She asks, all smiley, fixing up his shirt by tugging on the collar.

He nods and meets Ben’s eye as he speaks to Casey. “Harvard’s good,” he confirms, sort of sincerely, can’t help himself from smiling as Ben wraps an arm around Casey and cackles something into his ear. “How about you?” He asks politely, interested but also making impressions, directing her subtly towards the kitchen for conversation a bit away from the chaos of the living room.

She eyes him as he grabs his glass of Merlot. “Sometimes it feels like having one kid in the house is harder than having two,” she sighs, but she’s still smiling, hands clasped. “You know, I remember when you were this tall—” she holds her hand to her chest, “and now you’re drinking wine and, seemingly, hosting Christmas dinner.”

Matt laughs and shakes his head, taking it as a part-sign to get her a glass as well. “Ma did all the hard work. I’m escaping here because I’m tired of answering questions from my grandfather. It’s only been *an hour,* Chris,” he squeezes his eyes shut and exaggerates, sinking into his hands before looking back up amusedly. “You want any wine?”

“Sure, yeah, a little.” Chris nods towards the chilling white on the counter and Matt picks the bottle up quickly, pours her half a glass. “You’re always welcome to escape to our place if you really need it,” she whispers, winks, and takes a sip.

“Dinner!” His mom shouts from the dining room, and immediately the house begins to sound like elephants stampeding, everybody walking at once.

Matt smiles at Chris and nods, and that’s all they need before heading over to the dining room to claim spots. The table is covered in foil trays with enough food to feed fifty, though they’re capped out at twelve, as if that makes this less chaotic. He’s smooshed between Ben and his thirteen-year-old cousin Angelica, barely comfortable enough to be human.

Ben is immediately telling stories, sipping down his wine, shoveling mashed potatoes into his overactive mouth between words. “It’s bizarre, it’s a different world,” he says, gesticulating with his fork in hand, nearly poking Matt’s eye out. “I saw Michelle Pfeiffer grabbing tomatoes at some farmers market. And you’re not— You’re not supposed to say anything, you know, that’s sort of uncouth, so I just… I reach past her and say ‘oh, excuse me’ as if I have no clue who the hell she is.”

“Michelle Pfeiffer…” His grandfather repeats, eyes squinted in thought, totally uninterested in what Ben is actually saying. “Where do I know her from?”

“*Scarface*, probably,” Matt and Ben say at the same time, bursting into a shouty laugh immediately after.

“Matt and I saw Spike Lee a couple of years ago in New York,” Ben continues shortly after, fondness written all over his face, gripping Matt’s shoulder off-handedly. “He had to physically restrain me.”

Somewhere in between a forkful of glazed ham and a sip of wine, Matt looks across the table and can’t help but be satisfied. It’s been a long time since he’s been among people who know him, really know him without proximity being the primary reason for companionship.

When Ben’s arm grazes his own and Angelica taps his other arm aggressively to get him to pass the rolls, he has a need to smile in that goofy way that draws out the wrinkles around his mouth and scrunch his eyes up. Maybe he looks like an airhead right now, he’s sure he does, but it’s pleasantly warm inside, and everybody is almost loud

enough to become one singular sound, and Ben is *here,* thank God, and nothing is awful, even if it's just for these few seconds, these few minutes.

Despite hating dish-duty, Matt volunteers himself when half of the family has made their way to the living room and the other half is busy drinking wine and gossiping.

His mom looks up, surprised, as he reaches over to grab her plate. "That's so sweet, Matty, yes. Sure! Thank you," she says, quickly gathering plates within her reach.

"Of course, yeah," Matt responds with a smile, a genuine one, wonders if the magic of Christmas grows to an overwhelming pile eventually large enough to benefit from. Sort of like falling in love. He's all bubbly.

He's got all the plates already in the sink before Ben shows his face again, holding trays of leftovers and dumping them on the counter.

Ben walks over to him, leans forward to catch his eyes. "You seem happy," he notes, sporting a matching grin himself.

"I think I am. Happy," Matt laughs back, soaping up each plate and setting them on the wire rack.

"Good," Ben sincerely says, rounding his hand on Matt's shoulder warmly, burning a hole in the fabric with the heat of his palm. He removes his hand quickly, thankfully, and lines up at the wire rack to load the soapy dishes Matt hands him. "I think your cousin was trying to make a move on me."

"Which one?" Matt snorts, jaw tensing as he rubs off a spot of cranberry sauce.

Ben loads up a plate. "Tall one. I always forget her name," he murmurs, looking around. "She laughed at my Schwarzenegger impression."

"Your Schwarzenegger is terrible," Matt says decidedly, because it is.

"I know," Ben laughs, loads a wine glass. "She leaned in and *laughed*. It was palpable."

Matt is weirdly tense around Ben today and just can't figure out why, suddenly chewing on the inside of his cheek. "Do not fuck my cousin,"

he warns, half-joking.

Ben cackles. “God, no. No, of course not. Is that how little you think of me?”

“Yes,” Matt quickly answers, somewhat relaxing at Ben’s apparent total lack of desire to get with his cousin. He laughs loudly when Ben bumps his hip against him and splatters water onto his shirt as a retort, returning the sentiment.

Sometimes Ben manages to make him feel so varied from the ways anybody else makes him feel that it scared him. It happens out of nowhere, usually; Ben smiles, or talks quickly with his crazy gestures, or dances like he’s never used his feet before, and something inside Matt’s head begins to flutter like that’s something the insides of heads are usually allowed to do. He doesn’t know how to navigate this, or what to prescribe it to, where to focus it.

It seems simple enough most days to chalk it up to familiarity, to common interest, to shared experiences and shared ideals. But in some fleeting moments, Matt has inevitably likened the internal faucet to being in love. In like. In something.

(This floats away just as quickly as it arrives, thankfully, buzzing by like a fast-track subway car. Matt is thankful for this, for this special line of defense, because if the thought lingered he’d probably stab it out of his brain himself. He can not have feelings, whatever it means to have feelings, for his best friend.)

(But in those moments, Matt finds himself wishing he had access to all of Ben. Wishes he could be allowed to peel him open bit by bit until he was faced with bare organs and a stringy nervous system.)

To be conscious of something is to accept it. Matt blows soap bubbles into Ben’s face and decides to stay asleep a little longer.

It’s late when they finally stumble down the stairs, shushing each other from making too much unnecessary noise.

Matt closed the basement door too loudly which was naturally hilarious, caused both of them to laugh in open-mouthed silence, tears prickling in the corners of Matt’s eyes.

This is the best part, Matt thinks as he’s leading Ben to the light switch so neither of them fall over. The rest of the house is quiet and the

world is theirs for right now, belongs to the feebly empowered hands of Ben and Matt.

Matt almost doesn't mind that they didn't get to eat the cookies today. Now it'll be a tomorrow-treat. Maybe they can even finish decorating them. He smiles to himself, holds it in or combines it with a laugh, he can't quite tell.

"Here," Ben says through another laugh, plopping down next to where he put their gifts. "I put 'em here."

At least the box is big, Matt thinks upon seeing Ben's present, laughs to himself, since he's undoubtedly getting a shitty present. But a present from Ben is better than a present from anybody upstairs. That much is true.

(He's just processed having to spend half an hour opening gifts that ranged, pretty much exclusively, from books to socks. His grandfather wrapped him up a stack of old CDs. That was probably the highlight.)

They do it like this every year, but Matt gets nervous anyway, no matter how intoxicated he manages to get beforehand. He fiddles with a hangnail, scans across the almost pathetic size of his own gift next to Ben's.

"You wanna start?" Matt asks, nudging his gifts closer, trying to feign confidence and calmness in the face of his desperate desire to backtrack.

It's too much. You keep doing this, and something's gonna wake up. It's too much.

Ben puts his beer down and nods, taking one last big breath to calm his giggles. He eyes the little taped-on note first and rubs the paper between his pointer and thumb. "Note first or last?"

Matt squints his eyes and tries to recall what he put on that goddamn note, coming up empty. "Last, I think," he bullshits, hopes Ben can't see through it considering his own drunk curtains.

The wrapping job is not the greatest. Wrapping up that many things into one package is *really* fucking hard. All the books are different sizes, and all those sizes are different from the DVDs sizes, and the sticky notes kept flying off and sticking to the wrong book. Only after finishing did it occur to him that he could've wrapped everything separately. And now, watching Ben's grubby hands attack his tape-

ridden paper, he's increasingly worried about the integrity of said sticky notes.

It's quiet for a long time when Ben rips the first slit and uncovers the first DVD. *GoodFellas.* He reads the, thankfully intact, sticky note diligently, focuses extra, and then sticks it on the rim of the coffee table. "Still haven't seen it," he assures Matt, bites back a smile as if Matt doesn't want, so badly, to see him smile.

"Thank fuck," Matt decides to say, picking at a piece of fuzz on his sock.

It goes like that for *The Kid,* and *The Exterminating Angel:* slow, thoughtful, trying not to smile, eyes building gloss. Matt feels like he's splayed out on an examination room by the end of just this part, prodded while ineffective anesthesia courses through him.

Ben gets to the books and instantly laughs at his little note on *The Waves*, poking Matt's knee with his foot. Matt tries to think back to what he wrote just a few days ago. Something about growing apart. "Jesus, Matt," Ben whispers as he reveals another book, molars visibly gnawing the inside of his cheek.

"Sorry. I'm— It's—"

"Shut up," Ben counters, reading the next note and only looking up again after. "It's not too much. It's great. It's perfect," he clarifies, finally smiling, reading Matt's mind again.

This does nothing for Matt's murderous male menopause returning. He's pinpricks all over, staring down at his fingers pulling at the carpet because he can't possibly be expected to look at Ben after saying something like that.

"You mentioned me twice?" Ben asks softly, quietly.

It takes Matt a second, but he lifts his head to see Ben holding up *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* brown eyes deep and shiny. "Yeah," he confirms, letting his mouth twist into a smile remembering those text-to-self discussions in seminar. "Yeah. You'll— I'm sure you'll know when."

"I'll call you," Ben says quickly, laughs afterwards like he's in disbelief or something, thumbing at the smooth cover of the book. "When I think it's— When I think you mentioned me. I'll call you."

Matt nods. “I’d like that,” he assures, as if Ben needs the assurance and can’t read Matt’s barely-hidden love right now. “Merry Christmas.”

Ben takes that as his hint to grab his present for Matt. He shoves it towards him, clears the floor of his own scraps. “Merry Christmas,” he repeats, dumb smile already spread across his face.

His wrapping job is much nicer. So much nicer that Matt wonders to himself if Ben got someone else to wrap it because there’s actually no fucking way Ben, *this* Ben, put a curled-up ribbon on top. He eyes Ben to make sure he understands that Matt caught him, but the guy doesn’t seem all too fazed.

So, Matt tears the ribbon off and sticks it onto the shirt he desperately wants to change out of, and inelegantly grabs the center of the wrapping and rips it like he’s prying open an elevator and—

Okay. Holy Shit.

If he’s— he rips further— that’s definitely— “Holy shit,” he whispers, stares between the half-opened package and Ben’s expecting, idiotic smile.

“Yup,” Ben encourages, laughs.

“No fuckin’ way,” Matt continues, rips the rest of the packaging off.

A fucking Sega Genesis.

He turns the box around. Something falls to the floor. The NHL Hockey game. Holy shit.

“Dude, no fuckin’ way,” Matt continues, scoffing, collatorally impressed and confused at once.

“You mentioned it. I thought— I dunno, seemed like a good option.”

Matt turns the box back around, stares at it, mouth agape.

He’d avoided buying it purely from a financial point of view. Fine, he had the money. They had the money, sometimes, usually, every once in a while they had enough money to spend on shit like this. And he almost did, God, he almost bought it three separate times, lingered in the aisle, contemplated how many meals he’d have to skip, if their paychecks from *School Ties* were really already gone or if they’d

somehow left it somewhere behind lock and key.

“How did you—?” Matt begins to ask, still amazed.

Ben just shrugs. “It’s Christmas, man.”

“I know it’s fuckin’ Christmas,” Matt murmurs, smacks Ben’s shoulder. “But this is—”

“It’s a fuckin’ gift,” Ben laughs. “You’re welcome. It’s not— I didn’t rob a bank for you.”

Matt resists the urge to ask *would you?* and instead leans over to pull Ben into a half-hug, just enough contact to sear him. “Thank you, man,” he whispers, means it so sincerely, fingertips tracing the box’s slippery surface.

“I didn’t read your note,” Ben notices suddenly, practically scrambling to find it again, folding it open unceremoniously.

Matt can't believe how good it feels to be alive right now. Ben got him a fucking Sega Genesis and he’s happy and tired and drunk. Everything is good. So fucking good.

And then Ben’s head perks up from reading the note, lips pursed to the side. “You always outperform me,” he murmurs, but he’s smiling wider than Matt has seen him smile in a long time, and his eyes are sparkly, warm and deep, tracking over the words on Matt’s little note over and over.

Usually, Matt would say that’s very true. He tends to take gifts too seriously, lets them reflect on himself too much. It means something even when he’s not trying to go for some big gesture. If his gift isn’t good enough, he’s underrepresenting what this friendship means to him, and he decidedly cannot have that. For some reason, this only really tracks with Ben, he notices now, staring at the personalized stack of recommendations next to Ben.

Sitting here with a Sega Genesis in his lap and a game he’s been dying to own, however, he’s not so goddamn sure about this whole outperforming thing.

“Are you fuckin’ kidding me?” Matt mutters back, tapping the box. “This is insane. Must’ve cost you—”

“Shut up,” Ben flushes, presses a punch to Matt’s shoulder. “I didn’t

give a shit about the price."

Now Matt flushes, feels the rum and the wine and, more plainly, how much he loves Ben. "Well, I'm really… I'm happy. With this. Very happy." He holds up the console with two hands, tucks his lip between his teeth to try and hide a smile.

"I— Maybe this is weird to say, and God knows I've, maybe, had a few too many, but— I, uh, I think about you a lot," Ben starts, says it quietly like not even the wind should be allowed to hear it, and Matt leans in closer practically on instinct, removing the console's box from his lap as if it's a barrier to listening. "Like, everything kind of reminds me of you."

Matt's jaw pulses. He gets the very real urge to press Ben's face between his hands just to hold it, to feel his flushing beneath his fingertips like he's got a measurable fever. He can't possibly say anything right now.

"I— uh, I met this girl at a comedy show a couple of days ago, like, just before I came over here and she asked, I dunno, off-handedly, if I had holiday plans. And it was… Man, it felt like something inside me came loose when I got the chance to… to talk about you." Ben's eyes widen like he's said something terrible. "Or— I dunno. This. About coming here," he backtracks, head ducking down but eyes pointing up like he's trying to catch a glimpse of Matt's face.

What is this? Matt feels the hot dizziness from the kitchen and the dinner table again but is unable to attribute it to the oven's temperature or the wine-chugging — Ben is the only common denominator. Whatever his face is doing is a mystery to him because his features are practically numb, buzzing like a static screen. What is this? Something came loose. What does that mean — Jesus, what is that allowed to mean?

Ben swallows his breath and picks at his thumb nail, the dull sound like a ticking clock. "So, I just wanted to say, I guess, that… I'm glad I'm here. And— and I'm really lucky. To have you. And I really fuckin' miss you. Even now, somehow, I really fuckin'... I miss you already. And thank you. For this." He holds up the bundle again, strokes his thumb against the cover of whichever book is on top, Matt can't exactly focus on that at the moment. "I'm gonna— I'll think about you even more now."

Matt blinks again and again, sucking on the inside of his cheek, the

walls around him twisting illogically because sincerity like this is overbearingly syrupy. He thinks about the shoulder massage, about Ben's breath against his ear, about Ben cleaning his room for him and blowing up the air mattress for him and assuring him nobody would care about the sugar cookies and surprising him and— Jesus, he's not sure if he knows what this sensation is. His insides are screaming something and it's unable to breach the barrier to the outside.

And Ben's head lifts slightly, and his eyes are dazed, unfocused, hopeful, terrified, and his hands can't stay in one place and he's so nervous about something, about this, about talking, that it makes Matt want to— to *kiss* him, or hold him, or something that feels less real, less needy, less gay.

Against all better judgement, his insides gain momentary control and scootch his hand to squeeze Ben's.

He's all clammy, isn't squeezing back, shifts his dazed eyes from their hands to Matt's eyes like he's following a hamster wheel.

Matt's heart is pounding between each side of his body. The throbbing is intense enough to make it physically apparent, he's sure, because Ben's shaking hand rides up and squeezes Matt's wrist.

"It's okay," Ben whispers, — and Matt isn't sure what is supposed to be okay, exactly, because he now wants to kiss Ben more than he wants to breathe and that couldn't possibly be okay— and quirks his mouth into a temporary smile.

Matt breathes shallowly, opens his mouth to try and talk. His eyes zero in on Ben's mouth, Ben's alcohol and sugar-coated lips, the inside pucker coated wine-purple, a glimpse of his wonky teeth. He's fucking nauseous, frantic in desire. He chances it against all logic: "What is?"

And he sees it, sees his mouth drawing Ben's eyes in, too. Ben's gaze is flicking back and forth like permission, like it needs to get any more obvious, like Matt isn't about to throw up or kick Ben away or kill himself or something much more drastic.

Ben wets his lips, leans in closer, squeezes Matt's wrist tighter and stops just short of a kiss — Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*

What is this? Matt can't breathe. Has he been breathing? He can't breathe anymore. Fuck. He closes his eyes, furrows his brows, waits for the atom bomb to fly in and finish the job for him. Ben smells like beer and human and his nose pushes up against Matt's and he nudges,

again, more permission, and Matt should be pulling away, why isn't he pulling away, God give him the strength to pull the fuck away—

Ben kisses him soft and pillowy and closed-mouthed, timid.

For the second time today, Matt feels twelve years old again, squeezes Ben's wrist back, tight and harsh, but he kisses back just as soft.

It's over before he can begin to wonder if it really happened, before he can get lost in it, all quiet and fluttery, horrifying despite its softness.

Ben sits back and removes his death grip on Matt's arm to feel at his lips with the pads of his fingertips. He looks beyond Matt for a second, out behind him, before establishing eye contact.

Matt shocks back a little when the contact occurs, stupidly, daggered by his look, fully uncontrolled and horrified and staring at this outside of himself.

"Good night," Ben says quickly, like a cover-up, and rushes to his air mattress, still dressed in his shirt and slacks, turning his back to Matt.

Chapter End Notes

> so can everybody pretend I didn't mess up the timeline last chapter (and I was doing so well) please and thank you. retconned by editing a portion of ch. 4... whoops!
>
> sorry this took so long again... im drowning... hope it being a bit longer makes up for it :)

Chapter 6: 6. Distractions

Chapter Summary

Ben is always there, on his mind, and he's never really noticed this until he began attempting to banish him entirely. An average day has him wondering about small Ben-adjacent things upwards of a hundred times; I wonder if he's up yet, I think this shirt is Ben's, He'd really like this movie, Why does the chair smell like him?

His absence in Matt's brain makes its previous presence much more tangible. It's disgusting. Matt can't recall ever thinking about anything as much as he does Ben. Even when he's not supposed to be thinking about him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Matt is wolfing down a pile of french toast casserole with his head plugged full of cotton and his limbs moving in slow accordance to his wishes.

It’s dark out. At nine in the morning, it’s still decently dark out. He wonders silently, syrup dripping from his momentarily stationary fork, if it might rain today, which would just be awfully aggravating. A rainy Christmas. All that rainwater turning to slippery ice alongside the rest of the halfway-melted snow. It’s not supposed to rain on Christmas.

He turns back to the breakfast table. He takes a healthy gulp of orange juice. He bites down on his molars and refuses to think.

Instead, he plays along. His aunt asks about Harvard, he tells her about Harvard. His brother asks him to pass the syrup, he fakes him out twice before passing it. His mother comes back with another scoop of casserole, he holds out his plate. Sometimes, you have to fold and admit this hand wasn’t dealt with you in mind. That’s fine. Matt is capable of folding and waiting his turn.

While scrubbing the dishes, Kyle comes up behind him, plants a hand on his shoulder. “So, what’d Ben get you?” He asks, knocking back the rest of his orange juice and dropping it in Matt’s to-be-cleaned pile.

God. This is where the not-thinking comes in. “A Sega Genesis,” he responds, smirking like he knows he should, stealing a glance at Kyle’s impressed expression.

“Not bad.” He does the kind thing and grabs the second sponge, joins Matt’s seemingly endless scrubbing.

Matt nods and presses hard enough to question if his force might break the plate. “Not bad.”

By the time Matt is finally ready to call Michelle, it's too late to justify.

The afternoon rolled around a couple hours ago.

His family is still downstairs watching a shitty Christmas movie Matt has no interest in. Lori came over with gifts to open later and apologies for not coming last night instead; her family apparently celebrated big on Christmas Eve this year because her grandmother has hip-replacement surgery scheduled today.

Matt has not heard from Ben. He hasn't even thought about him, really.

(He scrambled onto the couch and turned his back to Ben reciprocally, swinging his blanket over himself.

They were both being dishonest. Matt could hear Ben's uneven, panicked breathing. Matt was sure Ben could hear his, too.

His lips were coated in the taste of Ben's mouth, in the memory of his stupidly soft and powdery kiss. The couch was nothing but a cruel contrast to the ice-picks poking at his chest.

And Ben was both so close and so far away. And Matt suddenly couldn't think of anything but walking over and scooping him close. He almost — *almost* — forgot that wasn't standard practice. It seemed so natural to comfort him. To find comfort in him.)

His fingers dial Michelle's number before anything can penetrate his skull deep enough to become reality. He holds the phone to his ear, feels the weight of it in his hand, and shuts his eyes loosely.

"Hello?" Michelle answers with an absent-minded laugh after three drawn-out rings.

Matt sits up unexpectedly, as if struck with something.

"Chelle," he chokes out, throat going tight until he remembers:

Just for now, refuse to think. Let it stay downstairs.

"Matt," she says brightly, her voice lilted. "I thought you'd forgotten all about me."

It's a tease, something subtle and playful, that hits like a hammer no matter how it was intended.

"Sorry, I'm sorry," Matt mutters, genuinely sorry, rubbing a hand across his face and decidedly not lingering on his mouth. "It's— Ben went home and then—"

"Ben ended up coming?" She interrupts immediately, but she sounds like she's been wishing on it.

"Shit, yeah. Yes. I totally forgot to… to tell you. I didn't wanna interrupt your big celebration—"

"Oh, Matt. You wouldn't have been interrupting," she says tenderly, moves somewhere somehow with less background noise. "Does this mean I'll *finally* get to meet him?"

Oh.

Matt had forgotten about that little venture. He clenches his jaw — maybe it would be plausible to find some excuse eventually. Maybe it doesn't have to come to this. To their inevitable eye-locking, the implied competition, the dirty underlying current of sharing attraction.

If they meet, Matt is sure, Michelle will know. Whatever there is to know, she will. She's like that.

("He's gonna die," she said easily, chewing on a handful of slightly burnt microwave popcorn.

Matt frowned, unimpressed with the assumption, sure, but more surprised where she could've possibly gotten her inference from. "What are you talking about?"

She looked over as if *he* were the idiot, and paused the DVD. "C'mon," she laughed, bumped his knee. "You're supposed to be the movie boy."

He scoffed playfully and swung his legs across her lap, stole the remote back. "Yeah. We'll see about your little theory." A glug of beer

ran sharply down his throat, feeling self-satisfied as he pressed play once again.

An hour and fifteen minutes later, Rex did in fact die. "I should've put money on it," she mumbled, pressed a kiss to Matt's knee while laughing.

"I can't believe you knew," he muttered, watching as she crept up slowly until she was nestled between his thighs, arms folded across his chest, her chin rested atop them.

She shrugged, kissed his chin, her turn to be self-satisfied. "I've always been good at knowing.")

"I think so," Matt resigns, chewing on the fleshy inside of his cheek. "If he's not busy."

The not-thinking plan is quickly failing, operationally, and Matt is smacking down on any button possible to ensure it still has a chance.

But Ben is always there, on his mind, and he's never really noticed this until he began attempting to banish him entirely. An average day has him wondering about small Ben-adjacent things upwards of a hundred times; I wonder if he's up yet, I think this shirt is Ben's, He'd really like this movie, Why does the chair smell like him?

His absence in Matt's brain makes its previous presence much more tangible. It's disgusting. Matt can't recall ever thinking about anything as much as he does Ben. Even when he's not supposed to be thinking about him.

This drought is torturous. He's on the phone with his near-perfect girlfriend and it's taking all he has to avoid pop-ups of Ben's stupid little smile, his nervous hands, his—

He blinks, pulses his jaw, and locks into what Michelle is talking about. Christmas. Right. It's Christmas. She's— she's happy. And she "forgot to get the neighbor a present. Matt, I wanted to kill myself. I feel like a monster—"

"You're not a monster," he interrupts, mindlessly, eyes peeled so wide in internal shock he's glad she can't see him. It would certainly birth concern. "Sorry. I didn't mean to— Just. It was last minute, right? Him coming? It makes sense that… that you'd forget. Don't feel bad. You're a great person, Chelle, seriously."

I might have cheated on you with my best friend. I'm not sure what the qualifying factors are here. You're a great person and I'm something else entirely.

She breathes out a soft assured sound, and Matt can imagine her cheeks tinting pink and he, horribly, feels nothing. "I just… I hope it felt special for him, too. I can't imagine, y'know, what he's been through."

Right. The guy's wife died. "I'm sure it was," he says sincerely, rubbing the pads of his thumb and pointer together in an effort to give his skin useful contact that isn't the tactile memory of the wisps of hair building against Ben's forearms. He's sick. His girlfriend is facing a morality-crisis and he's— Jesus, what is he even doing?

It was a one-and-done kind of thing. A moment of… of weakness. No, God no, not weakness, — it can't be something that implies a giving-in — it was a moment of tenderness, of shared interest, false closeness. Tenderness. There was nothing fucking tender about the way Ben's eyes shot daggers into his own after all was said and done. Nothing tender about Ben's fingers digging into his wrists.

No thinking.

No thinking. He needs to be around people again. He can't do this right now, not in the brightness of the day, the unmistakable reality of sunlight.

"Matt?" Michelle's voice rings through his left ear. He shocks up out of his trance, shakes it all off. "You still there?"

"Yes, hi, yeah," Matt responds quickly, sitting up, diverting his attention away from the window and the general outside brightened both by the eye-sore of the mountainous snow and the contradictory sunbeams. "Sorry. I— The line must've broken up."

There's a hum on the other end that's almost accusatory. "It's fine, I… It's probably been a shit-show over there, too, huh?"

Truthfully, it's been a very nice holiday. Really. No dogs flew under any trees. Nobody fought about politics or, sometimes even worse, the ham being over-seasoned. There were no major spills a little Shout couldn't handle. It has been, by all measures, borderline *relaxing*. This was not something Matt could often say about the holidays. Especially not Christmas.

But, sure. It's been a shit-show. "Yeah," he sighs out, exasperated for reasons that will forever go unknown, running a hand across his face. "Yeah, sorry. I'm just not… I'm not all there yet. Family's still downstairs."

"It's okay, baby," Michelle says easily, softly, like she's running her hand through his hair and waiting for him to nudge into the touch. "We can call tonight? I'll… I gotta get going anyway. Gifts round five is starting soon."

Matt chuckles and scratches at his bicep, nodding. "That sounds good, yeah." He breathes out shallowly. "I'll call you around nine?"

"Perfect."

"Okay, great, cool. I'll— Sorry again. Bye, Chelle, bye— bye."

He hangs up and rolls over in bed, shouts into his pillow like a teenager, and quickly fixes himself back up. He dusts the wrinkles out of his pants and tugs on his Harvard sweatshirt, prepared to face the world (Lori, Kyle, and his mother) with a brave face.

Just as he begins to step out, the TV in his room suddenly becomes a taunt. He knows he wants to move the Genesis up here so it'll fully be his, but the box is currently tossed aside somewhere in the basement, waiting to be discovered by its next victim. Maybe it's the box. The box that makes you kiss your best friend.

He grabs the pillow again, shouts in a deflated way. This needs to be over already. He can't live like this. There is a conversation that needs to be had, but calling Ben to talk about this is too impersonal and going there face-to-face opens up the horrific possibility that it could (God, don't even say it, don't even *think* it) happen again. His hands are tacky when he tosses the pillow back on his bed.

His slide down the steps is quiet and cruel, anticipatory. The living room is quickly going to become a reality where he is not allowed to recall anything about The Basement other than getting a fantastic gift.

And fuck Ben, really, Matt thinks suddenly as his foot hits the last step. If they could've just talked about this when it happened — laughed about it, maybe discussed it — this wouldn't be happening. Matt would not feel like he needed to steal the air out of every room in order to have enough to barely function. He could talk to his girlfriend without wishing she had somehow, separately from *this*, come to disrespect him. Now there's this heaviness, this implication,

this guessing-game. Matt can't stand it.

"Matty?" His mom calls out from the living room, the TV's dialogue coming to a halt.

He swallows a breath and toes over, head peeking through the doorframe. "Yeah?"

Lori and Kyle are sitting on the couch together, heads now turned to Matt, while *Home Alone* plays sans sound in front of them. His mother is perched comfortably in the armchair, glass of wine in hand.

"Wanna do gifts?" Kyle asks, smiling, his arm swung around Lori.

Matt is not jealous of that. Not at all.

Matt is, however, a little fucking tired of gifts. Usually, they open immediate family gifts right after breakfast. But his aunt stuck around a little too long, and his mom complained about desperately needing a mid-morning nap. It's a nice wrap-up when it's done in the morning. In the afternoon, however, it just means that Christmas feels like two long days instead of a one-night event. And however relaxing this year's Christmas has been, Matt is content to find some distance from it.

But he's in pretend-mode either way, so he speeds into the living room and sits cross-legged in front of the tree. There is a scattered amount of gifts left: anything addressed to one another is present.

Matt easily tucks into one from his brother, book-shaped, and finds – surprise! – a book entitled *The Jaws Log.* He scans the back.

"It, uh—" Kyle interrupts him as he attempts to read the first sentence, "It's about the behind-the-scenes stuff. Production and all the crap they had to deal with." He says it like he's insecure about the gift, as if he needs to compensate somehow by explaining how it could be pertinent to Matt personally.

Matt smiles to show he's grateful, lands a squeeze on his brother's shoulder. "Hey, sounds good to me. Thanks, man."

"Nothing compared to Ben's gift, but…"

The smile becomes more hesitant, chuckling nervously with the deep hope that nobody can tell that he's fighting the urge to sprint out the door.

"Oooh, what'd he get you?" His mom chimes in, just as she opens Matt's gift to her — a set of Sears ironstone mugs, and a chain for her glasses to solve her constant complaint of displacing them. She leans forward to whisper a thank you and gives him a kiss on the top of his head.

Matt continues tight-lipped and grabs Lori's gift. "Sega Genesis," he says, strained, knowing that he needs to be enthusiastic or he'll get questions but being fully unable to. This whole fucking thing is just not fair. Ben left him to deal all alone without a word to dissuade him from believing he's lost his best friend for good. Something awful and cold bubbles against his ribcage, unidentifiable.

"That's that new one you've been talking about, right?" His mom asks.

Logically, this is not a malicious statement. It's even a kind one; acknowledging that your son's best friend got him something that he wanted very badly is in no way negative.

To Matt, it's a frustrating reminder of what he's losing, or what he's already lost, he's not sure how to discern the two anymore. There are so many ways to feel, so many realities intersecting and bending in ways Matt is unfamiliar with.

Because the thing is: he's always been good with Ben.

They've never had an actual fight; the closest they ever got was a two-hour two-way silent treatment on a long bus ride resolved when Ben sighed out, "what the fuck are we doing, man?" They've gotten awfully good at being together in ways that don't require being together at all; not irregularly, Matt will sit at his desk studying and Ben will lie on his bed writing in the same room and they will barely interact beyond syncing breaths and sharing quick thoughts. They excuse each other's bad habits to a chronic extent; Matt is a horrible slob and Ben cleans up after him, Ben is a needy conversationalist and Matt lets him ramble. They can, and do, talk for hours, hike up their respective phone bills to ungodly amounts. There is no boundary that goes uncrossed; Matt has seen Ben naked, has seen him passed out in a bathtub, has soothed his forehead while he puked, has pretended not to hear him while he jerked off in the same room as him, has passed him toilet paper during a particularly bad case of food poisoning, has held him through a terrible night after his first breakup. And now, apparently, he's fucking kissed him, too.

Beyond that, beyond the whole Ben-thing, the whole awful losing-

your-best-friend-thing, he's usually… he's always been good at feelings. At recognizing his own, figuring out somebody else's, being sensitive about all of it. This is all so far away from him that it's making him surrender some deep kind of control he didn't even realize he would ever need to concede.

Regardless, he presses his lips together and nods. "Yeah. I'll— I gotta set it up soon and get it started," he says, ripping into Lori's gift.

It's two Clairefontaine notebooks and a set of ballpoint pens, with a little note on top in very stylish handwriting stating:

For writing the next Great American Novel (or Screenplay)

– Love, Lori

"Thanks, Lori," he smiles, holds up her gift, and gets up to give her a side-hug.

"It's no Sega Genesis," she jokes, beaming.

"It's perfect," Matt interrupts quickly, needs to shut this down and out before the bubbling in his chest rises to the surface.

It works, for now, leaving everybody to unwrap the rest of their gifts in comfortable light chatter and celebration.

Matt feels a little guilty about his lackluster gifts, but everybody thanks him as if they've received a personalized stack of books and movies anyway. Sans the kissing. The fucking kissing.

He runs a hand across his face and pulls his last gift in front of him. He tears it open quickly, revealing a brand new Sony Discman.

"Figured your Walkman was a little out of style by now," his mom laughs as he does so, follows it up with a sip of her wine.

He's not sure how to tell her that he got a Discman from Michelle a few months ago, so he doesn't, and he stands up to give her a hug. "Thank you," he mumbles against her cheek.

With gifts finally fully wrapped up, Matt feels an immediate distance between yesterday and now. It's no longer Christmas, despite the decorations and the wrapping paper and the Christmas movie playing on TV and it being the literal *date* of Christmas, and that means that yesterday is in the rear view and can be safely tucked away.

It's a stretch. Matt is sitting on the couch next to Kyle and zoning out while everybody laughs at Harry's head burning, and he knows it's a goddamn stretch. The ornament dangling off a low branch on the tree next to the TV tells him as much. It's a gaudy display of friendship, maybe the insinuation of something more, and it means, in some physical sense, that this is not over.

He wonders if it would have happened had it not been Christmas Eve, if they had not exchanged sentimental gifts and gone months without seeing one another, if he had not spent all day over-analyzing the tactile responses his body gave to every one of Ben's slight touches. Maybe this was an inevitability. Maybe kissing your best friend comes for us all and nobody says the words out loud because it's too ridiculous to make sense of.

This is allowed to mean very little. Matt has never been able to make things mean very little.

("I can't fuckin' believe this," Ben muttered as they finished tearing another group of teenagers' movie tickets. "That should've been us."

Matt shrugged but felt a similar soft rage. "It was a long shot anyway," he accepted.

Two more people came by. Matt tore a ticket. Ben tore a ticket. *Enjoy the show.*

"Not really," Ben pointed out. He stepped over to Matt's side as they got close to showtime and threw himself around Matt melodramatically. "Nobody even knows who they are."

Matt laughed, ignored that he caught a purposeful whiff of Ben's hair, and pushed him off. "Nobody knows who we are either, asshole."

Another group entered through the doors and Ben rushed back to his side and tore their tickets happily, as if he weren't festering a grudge against Ethan Hawke and Robert Sean Leonard. "That's what I'm saying. Now we're doing this bullshit instead of starring alongside goddamn Robin Williams." He quickly toed back over to Matt.

"Our time will come, dude," Matt laughed, elbowing Ben's arm. "Relax. Somebody else'll be tearing off tickets for our big break soon. You've gotta learn to slow down sometimes."

Ben sighed through a toothy grin, his sharp teeth on full display, arm wrapped around Matt's shoulder. "What would I possibly do without

you?"

It was an off-handed casual thing — what would I do without your guidance in the face of my own eagerness surrounding acting? — but it left Matt a spiraled mess for days. What would *he* possibly do without *Ben*?

Imagining it made him go pale, turned him skittish inside his own body. And the examination of why exactly this was was even less available, made him turn to deafening levels of music through his headphones just to pretend there were no thoughts surrounding not just abandonment, but complete unfamiliarity.)

If they had never met, would Matt have felt it somewhere in his body like he does when he considers his absence? Would he be far away from himself in that painfully dull way that occurs he doesn't see Ben for six months and settles for phone calls to fill the unidentifiable part of his insides that has Ben written all over it without permission?

He grips at the couch's arm, grits his teeth, eyes wide in some rooted shock.

This does not need to mean much of anything at all. It does not. There is no comfortable conclusion. This is fine. There is no need to know every part of oneself. You're allowed to close up that awful thing you don't want to access. Right?

"I'm gonna get some air," Matt croaks out, speeding off of the couch before anybody can pretend to be concerned. He tugs on the jacket he knows has an old pack of Marlboros in the left pocket and beelines to the corner of his street to get away from the suffocating reminders.

It's raining. It's not supposed to rain on Christmas.

He shields the end of his cigarette and lights up, inhales sharply, enough for it to go comfortably to his head and settle like a buzz.

The casing has drops of water like tears on some teenage girl's diary entry.

Matt closes his eyes and leans against a brick wall and holds in a desperate desire to cry. Every thought is a shallow shot to a barren field ricocheting; it hits him back like punishment as he attempts to dispel it. Thinking is cruel. Finding a way to stop thinking is more cruel. You can only keep it all in for so long.

Shakily, he takes another drag. There are so few options here. There are so many considerations. Most importantly, most pressingly: *am I in love, in-not-friendship, with Ben?*

Winter Break is the time for decisions.

Chapter End Notes

apologies for my delays.
love u all I read ur comments like the morning paper I truly appreciate them so much <3

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